

Screen

48:1 Spring 2007

issue editor

Annette Kuhn

ALISON BUTLER: 'Motor-driven metaphysics': movement, time and action in the films of Maya Deren **1**

SAM DIORIO: Total cinema: *Chronique d'un été* and the end of Bazinian film theory **25**

MASHA SALAZKINA: Addressing the dialectics of sexual difference in Eisenstein's *Que viva México!* **45**

BELÉN VIDAL: Feminist historiographies and the woman artist's biopic: the case of *Artemisia* **69**

translation

BÉLA BALÁZS: New translation by Rodney Livingstone of extracts from *Der sichtbare Mensch/Visible Man* (1924), with introduction by Erica Carter **91**

debate

RICHARD RUSHTON: Absorption and theatricality in the cinema: some thoughts on narrative and spectacle **109**

reviews

MARY ANN DOANE: Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* **113**

AMY HERZOG: David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* **119**

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL: Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914–1918* **125**

KATHLEEN M. GOUGH: Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture* **131**

ALISON PEIRSE: Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy* **137**

cover illustration

Eisenstein with a sugar skull. Picture courtesy Mexican Picture Partnership

'Motor-driven metaphysics': movement, time and action in the films of Maya Deren

ALISON BUTLER

In April 1959, Maya Deren gave a lecture at the Living Theater in New York entitled 'Moving-Pictures: Motor-Driven Metaphysics'. The press release for the lecture read as follows:

Miss Deren's lecture 'Moving-Pictures: Motor-Driven Metaphysics' will deal with the formal and philosophical concepts implicit in the actual techniques of the medium. She will discuss the meaningful use of the motor and the mobility of the camera to create 'an art form based not on the earth-bound, step-by-step narrative idea of time, space and relationships which reflected the petty materialism of the 19th century, but on the poetic, metaphysical concepts of the actual nature of reality which were contained in the most ancient visionary myths and which are daily confirmed by our most advanced sciences – from physics to psychiatry.'¹

The idea of 'motor-driven metaphysics' is an appropriate emblem of Deren's aesthetics, condensing several key aspects of her thought into a single concept. In common with many modernist artists and art critics, she took the view that the task of the artist was to fulfil the unique potential of his or her medium. Since film as a medium was both modern and mechanical, she envisaged its vocation as the exploration of the phenomenological and philosophical consequences of technological modernity. She describes film as 'the twentieth-century art form', concerned with 'time, movement, energy and dynamics'.² An interest in the creation of new images of time and movement is a constant thread

¹ Press Release for the Living Theater Lecture, Maya Deren Collection, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University (henceforth MDC), Paige Box 1.

² Maya Deren, 'Cinematography: the creative use of reality', in Bruce McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren* (New York, NY: McPherson, 2005), p. 127.

throughout her film work, alongside her other well-documented interests in dance, anthropology and poetics.

Although Deren differentiates between art and science as forms of knowledge, her film theory constantly connects physics and metaphysics. The theory of relativity is a frequent touchstone in her thought. In a graduate school term paper on seventeenth-century precursors of the theory of relativity, she wrote:

When the absolute nature of the universe was gradually supplanted by the concepts of the rational nature of the universe, the corresponding change took place in the concept of the relationship of man. Men's systems have been consistently read out of the cosmos.³

In 'Cinema as an art form' she argues that the emergence of cinema 'in a period marked, simultaneously, by the development of radio in communication, the airplane [sic] and the rocket-ship in transportation, and the theory of relativity in physics' is no coincidence, and that, just as air travel and radio have made 'a relativistic reality of time and space', so cinema should seek its vocation as 'a time-space art with a unique capacity for creating new temporal-spatial relationships and projecting them with an incontrovertible impact of reality'.⁴ Relativity is also invoked to describe the subjective experience of modernity:

Imperceptibly, almost, this sense of relativism has begun to influence our thinking. In spatial terms, for example, the absolutistic differentiation between *here* and *there* loses meaning as *here* and *there*, being so mutually accessible, become, in effect, almost identical. In terms of time, the chronology of the past, present and future has also increasingly lost its meaning as we have come to understand the continuity of the past with the future – and, prodded on by the actual acceleration of historical processes, to deal with the present moment as an extension of the past into the future rather than as an independent temporal period. . . . The concept of absolute, intrinsic values, whose stability must be maintained, gives way to the concept of relationships which ceaselessly are created, dissolved and recreated and which bestow value upon the part according to its functional relation to the whole. We face the problem of discovering the dynamics of maintaining an *unstable equilibrium*.⁵

'An anagram of ideas on art, form and film' ends with this resounding call:

The history of art is the history of man and his universe and of the moral relationship between them. Whatever the instrument, the artist sought to re-create the abstract, invisible forces and relationships of the cosmos, in the intimate, immediate, forms of his art, where the problems might be experienced and perhaps resolved in miniature. It is not presumptuous to suggest that cinema, as an art instrument especially capable of recreating relativistic relationships on a plane of

3 Maya Deren, 'Reason, or the dyadic relativity of the seventeenth century and its development towards modern triadic relativity in science, philosophy and ethics', Smith College term paper, MDC, Box 5, Folder 8, p. 45.

4 Maya Deren, 'Cinema as an art form', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, pp. 29–30.

5 Ibid., pp. 30–31.

6 Maya Deren, 'An anagram of ideas on art, form and film', in *ibid.*, p. 109.

7 'Course outline', MDC, Box 5, Folder 12.

8 Lecture given at Cleveland Museum of Modern Art on 6 April 1951, *Film Culture*, no. 29, (1963), p. 67 (hereafter Cleveland Lecture).

9 Deren, 'Cinematography: the creative use of reality', p. 124.

10 Maya Deren, 'Creating movies with a new dimension: time', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, p. 132.

11 Yale Lecture transcript (1949), MDC, Box 19, Folder 3, p. 18 (hereafter Yale Lecture).

intimate experience, is of profound importance. It stands, today, in the great need of the creative contributions of whomsoever respects the fabulous potentialities of its destiny.⁶

An interesting insight into the way she translated her vision of cinema as a technology of relative space–time into practice is provided by the outline of a course that she was invited to teach at Smith College in the late 1950s (although in the event, the course was abandoned for lack of suitable equipment). 'A laboratory course in "filmic thinking"', it would have involved:

An investigation of the principle and potentialities of the medium as a *creative* art, rather than as a means of reproducing reality, recording theater, or illustrating fiction; and an effort to clarify the principle of film-form as deriving from the creative possibilities of the camera-eye, the lens – as discoverer and inventor of space –, of the mechanism, as a time machine; of the editing as a manipulation of 'celluloid memories' into a new experience.⁷

Class titles include 'The camera eye: film space', 'The camera pulse: film time', 'Time–space relationships: time characteristics of lenses; time as definition of space' and 'The camera brain: filmic thinking'. Deren talks repeatedly of slow motion as the 'microscope of time' (a phrase also used by Dziga Vertov and Jean Epstein) and stresses the capacity of film to reveal aspects of reality unseen by the human eye. Her terminology here, with its Vertovian echoes, suggests that, despite the distinctions she is careful to draw between scientific and artistic knowledge, she saw film as an exploratory medium capable of fostering new insights into the physical world.

In Deren's aesthetics, time is privileged over space as an essential component of expression in the medium of film. 'Space', she contends, 'is created by time in the film'.⁸ She categorizes film as a temporal art form, along with music, dance and poetry: 'the structure of a film is sequential. The creative action in film, then, takes place in its time dimension; and for this reason the motion picture, though composed of spatial images, is primarily a *time form*'.⁹ In 'Creating movies with a new dimension: time', she differentiates film from photography on the grounds that, instead of arresting the moment, it is 'concerned with the way in which the moment passes and becomes the next one': 'This metamorphosis cannot be composed within a frame, but only *through* frames, from one frame to the next. Such movement concerns itself not with details of space, but with details of movement in time.'¹⁰

At points her thinking on questions of time seems to echo Henri Bergson's, as when she comments on the difficulty of conceptualizing time without lapsing into spatial metaphors: 'unfortunately our language does not have many words for time in it. They're all spatial terms.'¹¹ Just as Henri Bergson, in *Matter and Memory*, turns to memory in order to

establish the continuity of matter and consciousness, so Deren, in ‘Anagram’, invokes memory in order to establish her view of filmmaking as the production of ‘man-made reality’. The distinguishing feature of human consciousness, Deren claims, is that:

[T]he memory of man is not committed to the natural chronology of his experience – whether of an extended period, a single event, or a compulsive reaction. On the contrary, he has access to all his experience simultaneously. He can compare the beginning of a process to the end of it, without accepting it as a homogeneous totality; he can compare similar portions of events widely disparate in time and place, and so recognize both the constancy of elements and their variable functions in one context or another; and he is able to perceive that a natural, chronological whole is not immutable, but that it is a dynamic relationship of functioning parts.¹²

Memory is thus crucial to creativity, because it ‘makes possible imagination, which is the ability to so accelerate real, natural processes that they become unreal and abstract’.¹³ Elsewhere she describes film footage as ‘fragments of a permanent incorruptible memory’¹⁴ or ‘super memory which you can relate as you relate to your own memory in a creative process not according to the chronology which was original to the act but according to a creative chronology which you construct’.¹⁵ Although there is no evidence that Deren had read Bergson, she would have been aware of his ideas via the essays of literary critic and Imagist poet T.E. Hulme, and her metaphysical film aesthetic is expressed in distinctly Bergsonian terms, making reference to film’s unique capacity to convey ‘the constant *becomingness* of something’¹⁶ and explaining her ambition ‘to make a form which was infinite, the changingness of things’.¹⁷

Deren’s thinking about cinematic time is fragmentary rather than rigorous, and includes two conflicting ways of conceptualizing time which create contradictions in her film theory and practice. Albert Einstein and Bergson famously disagreed about the nature of time. In common with classical physicists, Einstein conceived of time as divisible and measurable (a quantitative multiplicity), whereas Bergson considered time not divisible or measurable *without a resulting change in its nature* (a qualitative multiplicity). Bergson criticized Einstein for confusing the two types of multiplicity so that, with regard to the nature of time, the theory of relativity is merely ‘a new way of spatializing time’.¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze claims that Bergson was not attacking, but attempting to augment, the theory of relativity: ‘Bergson was here working out new philosophical concepts relating to the theory of relativity: he thought relativity involved a conception of time which it didn’t itself bring out, but which it was up to philosophy to construct’.¹⁹ As Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers comment: ‘For Bergson all the limitations of scientific rationality can be reduced to a single and decisive one: it is incapable of understanding duration since it reduces time to a

12 Deren, ‘An anagram of ideas on art, form and film’, p. 44.

13 Ibid., p. 47.

14 Deren, ‘Cinematography: the creative use of reality’, p. 123.

15 Yale Lecture, pp. 12–13.

16 Vanderbilt Film Symposium, Smith College, 11 April 1961, transcript, MDC, Box 19, d 1, b and c, p. 21 (my emphasis).

17 Cleveland Lecture, p. 67.

18 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York, NY: Zone, 1991), p. 85.

19 Gilles Deleuze, ‘On *The Movement-Image*’, in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 48.

²⁰ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature* (London: Flamingo, 1985), p. 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²³ D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time-Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 52.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 213.

sequence of instantaneous states linked by a deterministic law'.²⁰ If time is regarded as nothing more than a geometric parameter, it can not only dilate and contract, but also, theoretically, run in reverse. This was Einstein's view: 'For us convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, although a persistent one'.²¹ The rejection of directional time by physicists contributed to the mutual hostility of the two cultures and impoverished both, as Prigogine and Stengers argue:

To deny time – that is, to reduce it to a mere deployment of a reversible law – is to abandon the possibility of defining a conception of nature coherent with the hypothesis that nature produced living beings, particularly man. It dooms us to choosing between an antiscientific philosophy and an alienating science.²²

Since Einstein, scientific thinking about directional time has developed considerably, but in Deren's day the issue was beset by apparently irreconcilable contradictions. Deren's comments on time tend to conflate the notions of a distinctively modern *experience* of time and a modern scientific *conception* of time, missing the potential antagonism between the two. Both ways of thinking about time operate in her films, though over the course of her filmmaking career, as her films become less overtly subjective (or less concerned with individual subjectivity), the scientific conception of time becomes more dominant.

Deren's film theory, with its emphasis on time, clearly indicates that she was moving towards what Deleuze identifies as the cinema of the time-image, which he locates historically in the postwar period. However, her interest in time as a fourth dimension which functions in relation to the other three anchors her work within the regime of the movement-image; for, as D.N. Rodowick points out: 'understanding duration means conceiving the temporalization of space as change, rather than the spatialization of time as "movement"'.²³ In many ways Deren's work seems to belong in a transitional phase, between classical and modern, American and European, prewar and postwar models. The question of montage is clearly crucial here, given its centrality to both Deren's and Deleuze's thought. In the *Cinema* books, Deleuze describes how the cinema of the movement-image works by imposing sensory-motor linkages across cuts, forging kinetic chains with rational and commensurate links. Purely optical cuts and false continuities can also be subordinated to sensory-motor linkages, functioning as 'simple lacunae, that is, as voids which are still motor, which the linked images must cross'.²⁴ The crucial distinction between the modern cinema of the direct time-image and the old cinema of the movement-image, in which time is given only indirectly, comes with the unlinking of images and the autonomy of the cut, which takes on significance in itself. The subordination of time to movement by montage is a precarious operation. On the one hand, 'time depends on movement, but through the

25 Ibid., p. 36.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 37.

28 Jean Louis Schefer, *L'Homme ordinaire du cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard/Cahiers du cinéma, 1980), cited in Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 37. See also *Du monde et du mouvement des images* (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile/Cahiers du cinéma, 1997).

29 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 41.

30 Maya Deren, 'Films in the classicist tradition', in VèVè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, Catrina Neiman (eds), *The Legend of Maya Deren: a Documentary Biography and Collected Works, Volume I, Part Two, Chambers (1942–47)* (New York, NY: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1988), pp. 404–5.

intermediary of montage; it flows from montage, but as if subordinate to movement';²⁵ but on the other hand, movement and montage are constantly in danger of breaking down to release a direct image of time. Any aberrant, uncentred movement or irrational break in the montage is capable of releasing time from its subordination to movement. The concept of the movement-image is complicated by Deleuze's assertion that 'the movement-image seems to be in itself a profoundly aberrant and abnormal movement'.²⁶ Summarizing Jean-Louis Schefer, Deleuze says:

The movement-image does not reproduce a world, but constitutes an autonomous world, made up of breaks and disproportion, deprived of all its centres, addressing itself as such to a viewer who is in himself no longer centre of his own perception. The *percipiens* and the *percipi* have lost their points of gravity.²⁷

Aberrant movement – which reveals time – is therefore the underlying tendency of cinema, prompting Schefer to comment that 'cinema is the sole experience where time is given to me as a perception'.²⁸ What Deleuze calls 'normal movement', encapsulated by the sensory-motor schema, in which perception, affect and action are articulated dynamically and proportionately, holds at bay the aberrations of movement which would otherwise be generated by the cinematic image: 'the sensory-motor schema moves forward by selection and co-ordination. Perception is organized in obstacles and distances to be crossed, while action invents the means to cross and surmount them. . . . Movement is saved by becoming relative.' In the cinema of the time-image, the sensory-motor schema is not overtaken or overcome: it is shattered from within. With Schefer, Deleuze concludes that 'the direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom'.²⁹

From this discussion, it should be clear that the distinction between the movement-image and the time-image is not absolute, any more than the differentiation between two types of cinema is hard and fast, as Deleuze himself has pointed out. The time-image and the movement-image are interpenetrating tendencies. Moreover, although Deleuze sometimes uses the term 'classical' and his definition of the action-image overlaps considerably with definitions of classical cinema, some films – notably those of Sergei Eisenstein and his Soviet contemporaries – are located within the regime of the movement-image which could by no means be considered 'classical' in the sense which the term carries in anglophone film studies. The decisive factor in determining whether films belong to the regime of the movement-image is not stylistic conformity but the extent to which a dynamic synthesis – achieved through montage – integrates images into a whole.

It is worth considering what Deren's well-known description of her films as 'classicist' might have in common with Deleuze's conception of the classical action-image.³⁰ Deren's conception of classicism derives, as

31 Renata Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, 1917–1961* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

32 'Classicism in the period of 19th century romanticism', pp. 5–6, Smith College term paper, MDC, Box 5, Folder 5.

33 T.E. Hulme, 'Modern art and its philosophy', in *Speculations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2nd ed., 1936), p. 86, quoted in 'The influence of the French Symbolist school on Anglo-Saxon poetry', Smith College thesis, MDC, Box 5, Folder 7, Introduction, en. 10, n.p.

34 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: a Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 3rd ed., 1948).

35 Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time-Machine*, fn. 6, p. 212.

36 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1986), p. 141.

Renata Jackson shows, from her reading of Hulme.³¹ In a graduate school term paper on romanticism and classicism in nineteenth-century poetry, Deren explains Hulme's theory that 'the dominance of the Romanticist or the Classicist temper bears direct relationship to the degree to which the men of the period are at peace or at odds with nature (or, more generally, the environment)'.³² In her Masters thesis, she quotes Hulme's argument that 'a naturalistic art is the result of a happy pantheistic relation between man and the outside world', whereas 'the tendency to abstraction, on the contrary, occurs in races whose attitude to the outside world is the exact contrary of this'. She makes it clear in her essays that she regards the classical aspiration as viable and laudable even when it runs counter to the cultural climate, and recruits Hulme to support her critical view of modern art, claiming that he predicts 'the industrial abstractionism of modern art as an escape from the increasingly chaotic nature of the modern era'.³³ Hulme defines classical aesthetics as the expression of a belief in a fixed natural order and finite human nature, in contrast to romanticism in which nature is sublime and strange and humanity a reservoir of infinite possibilities.

The influence of the ideas of Wilhelm Worringer on both Hulme and Deleuze accounts for the points of congruence between their otherwise contrasting critical perspectives. Worringer proposed a distinction between vital and geometrical art based on the degree of the culture's empathy with, or alienation from, the organic world.³⁴ Hulme saw parallels between this theory and his own, and was influenced by it in the development of his critique of modern art. Deleuze, as Rodowick points out, bases his notions of the organic and crystalline regimes on Worringer's use of these terms.³⁵ While Deren's and Deleuze's conceptions of classical values differ significantly, there is clearly a common core in the idea of forms which express a stable and harmonious relationship between human beings and an environment which supports meaningful action, or as Deleuze puts it, 'milieux which actualise and modes of behaviour which embody'.³⁶ In some respects, Deren's description of her films as classical is surprising, given the instability and hostility of the environments in which some of her protagonists attempt to act – and perhaps this is why she did not stick with the term. Nevertheless, there is in her films an abiding concern with overcoming alienation and with mastering the environment – which always appears as a stage for action, however inhospitable.

In order to understand the relationship between time, space and action in the movement-image, it is useful to go back to Deleuze's source material in Bergson. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson explains that human perception prioritizes space over time because the objects surrounding us represent actions we can accomplish or ways we can be acted upon: the distance between ourselves and objects measures 'the proximity of a threat or promise in time'. The space we perceive, Bergson says, offers us 'a diagram of our near future', and the space beyond that symbolizes our more distant future; hence our belief in the

37 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York, NY: Zone, 1991), p. 144.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

39 'Art and creativity' lecture notes, MDC, Box 4, Folder 16 (n.d.).

40 MDC, Box 6, Folder 7b.

41 'Material on women', 'Research materials', MDC, Box 4, Folder 24 (n.d.).

existence of unperceived space.³⁷ Time, on the other hand, ceases to exist for us as it passes, because consciousness, ever bent on action, materializes only those former perceptions which are of immediate use (hence the uncanny quality which can adhere to the appearance in consciousness of memories which are not ordered by the exigencies of action). Bergson offers this formula for the relationship of consciousness to space and time: 'perception is the master of space in the exact measure in which action is the master of time'.³⁸

Although the appeal for Deren of Hulme's notion of classicism was undoubtedly related mainly to the question of form, it may also be that her attraction to a particular image of action, of self-assertion over time and space, came from her own struggle to master the conditions of her existence. Insofar as time is the enemy of action, Deren's thoughts on her relationship with time are of interest:

I cannot remember a time of my life when I was not forever running out of waking time, staying up all night to finish a project, struggling with problems large and small and related to the wildest assortment of interests – including tropical fish, cats, metaphysics, music, sewing. . . .³⁹

Boosted by strong coffee and amphetamines, Deren was always frenetically busy. Amongst her papers, the words 'Sleep – need of –' written on a page of a small notebook, suggest the exhaustion she may have experienced as a consequence (reinforced by the effects of the poverty in which she lived for much of her adult life).⁴⁰ By the accounts of those who knew her, Deren was tenacious in her attempts to dominate her environment, sometimes by means so traditionally feminine as to suggest masquerade, and at others through activities and behaviour unconventional for a woman of her generation. Her comments on women's problematic relationship with action makes it clear that she felt constrained by orthodox femininity: 'Most women are feminine in their activities because they cannot dominate their environment on any other plane'.⁴¹ Deren's desire to transcend the constraints of her situation as an embodied social subject may well have added to the attractiveness, for her, of forms of movement which spatialize time and preserve agency. It may also help to explain why, when she ceases to figure as a physical presence within the films, she reinscribes herself in them as an authorial principle which, through control of action and movement, asserts power over time and space.

The tension between action or agency and time is so immediately apparent in Deren's first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), that it could be said to be its theme. Rodowick explains that Deleuze understands the relationship between consciousness and time in terms of the poet Arthur Rimbaud's famous phrase 'I is an other': 'the form of time presumes a division of the subject into a passive Ego (*Moi*) that is in time and constantly changing, and an I (*Je*) that actively carries out a

42 Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time-Machine*, pp. 128–9.

43 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), p. 138.

synthesis of time by continually dividing up the present, past, and future'.⁴² The continual splitting of time which doubles perception with memory thus produces a continual division of the subject. Bergson makes this argument, claiming that we experience successive states qualitatively rather than quantitatively, one state melting into another, but in a social world – and in language – we conceptualize these states discretely and numerically, effectively spatializing them:

[I]n proportion as the conditions of social life are more completely realized, the current which carries our conscious states from within is strengthened; little by little these states are made into objects or things; they break off not only from one another, but from ourselves. Henceforth we no longer perceive them except in the homogeneous medium in which we have set their image, and through the word which lends them its commonplace colour. Thus a second self is formed which obscures the first, a self whose existence is made up of distinct moments, whose states are separated from one another and easily expressed in words.⁴³

After its first few enigmatic images – the mannequin's hand depositing the flower on the ground and the mysterious figure disappearing around the bend in the lane – *Meshes of the Afternoon* begins with a sequence of subjective shots – a shadow, closeups of feet, legs and hands – which seem calculated to trigger identification as a sensory-motor response, giving a literal rendition of 'I is an other'. The doubling of the protagonist, not once but three times, and the structure of repetition with variation, as the crucial props (key, flower, knife, mirror) are conjugated in different ways, suggesting some dysfunctional variation on the formation of a social self as described by Bergson. The anthropocentric focus on the protagonist's body (or bodies) and the dynamic deployment of continuity editing sets up a relationship between figure and space which would seem to locate the film within the regime of the action-image (as does the determinate milieu: Hollywood, 1943, as the opening title states). On the other hand, the failure of action, beginning with the dropping of the key, is linked to the emergence of aberrant movement, signalled initially by the apparently unmotivated use of slow motion in the shots showing the key falling and Deren's feet on the steps as she retrieves it. Editing strategies which spatialize relationships are set up in contest with temporal duration, as if, unable to distinguish memory from perception, the protagonist experiences successive moments in time as simultaneous objects in space, intensity as extensity. In Deleuzian terms, the coexistence of 'impossible' temporalities in *Meshes* unleashes the 'powers of the false' and shifts the film into the regime of the time-image; but it might be more useful to conceptualize the film in terms of a hybrid regime, in which powerful metonymies of continuity and false continuity are pitched against the disunifying effects of nonchronological time. The film's suicidal ending reinforces the impression that Deren does not

44 Leslie Satin, 'Movement and the body in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*', *Women and Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1993), p. 47.

45 Maya Deren, 'At Land', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, p. 247.

46 Maya Deren, 'Three abandoned films', in *ibid.*, p. 248.

47 Maya Deren, 'Chamber films', in *ibid.*, pp. 251–2.

48 Letter to James Card, *Film Culture*, no. 39 (1965), p. 30.

embrace the powers of the false – or relinquish the potency of the action-image – without ambivalence.

This ambivalence also marks the portrayal of the body in *Meshes*, which, as Leslie Satin comments, vacillates 'towards and away from kinesthetic response'.⁴⁴ Deren's physical presence is emphasized in sensuous closeups which endow her body with weight and volume, and dematerialized in shots which exploit the capacity of the film frame to distort and defy gravity by virtue of the relative relationship between moving objects and the mobile frame. *At Land* (1944) continues this exploration of the relationship between the body and space. Deren's programme notes on the film stress its bipolar construction around the tension between a moving body and a changing environment; but over time the emphasis in her descriptions alters subtly. In 1945, she claims that it depicts 'a relativistic universe in which the individual alone is a continuous identity' and 'the effort of the individual to relate oneself, as an identity, to a fluid, apparently incoherent universe'.⁴⁵ In 1946 it is 'an inverted Odyssey, where the universe assumes the initiative of movement and confronts the individual with a continuous fluidity, towards which, as a constant identity, he [sic] seeks to relate himself'.⁴⁶ However, by 1960 the universe, which was 'once conceived as a vast preserve, landscaped for heroes, plotted to provide them with appropriate adventures', is now so unstable and unpredictable that 'One does not so much act upon such a universe as re-act to its volatile variety. Struggling to preserve, in the midst of such relentless metamorphosis a constancy of personal identity'.⁴⁷ Deren's changing accounts of the film gradually transfer agency from the protagonist to the environment, with a correlative diminution in heroic stature; but the film itself seems to preserve and indeed depend on the centrality and agency of the protagonist, as shots are married by match cuts on her actions and eyelines. Constancy of identity, which Deren claims is threatened by the volatility of the universe, paradoxically constitutes the unifying formal principle of the film (at least until the final few shots, in which the protagonist's flight is witnessed by a series of her former selves from earlier moments in the film). Deren's performance in the central role conveys childlike curiosity and confidence rather than existential uncertainty. Moreover, her performance of a psychokinetic feat – moving chess pieces around the board simply by looking at them – undermines the idea that she is incapable of initiating action or controlling her environment. The near-circular structure of the film, in which the protagonist emerges from the sea and after her adventures flees back along the shore, follows the contours of a classic quest-narrative, concluding with the resolution of return. After the temporal splits and overlaps of *Meshes*, *At Land* retreats to safe ground, recuperating time for movement in 'the world where the identity of movement spans and transcends all time and space'.⁴⁸

The structuring trope of *At Land*, the edit between disparate spaces joined by the apparently continuous movement of a single body, is

49 Maya Deren, 'Ritual in transfigured time', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, p. 225.

50 Mark Franko, 'Aesthetic agencies in flux', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 142.

51 Maya Deren, 'Untitled notes', in Clark et al. (eds), *The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume I, Part Two*, p. 268.

52 Letter to James Card, p. 30.

53 Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End: Essays on American Independent Filmmakers* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), p. 98.

54 Maya Deren, 'Choreography for the camera', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, p. 223.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

56 Original plan for *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, in Clark et al. (eds), *The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume I, Part Two*, p. 268.

investigated further by Deren in *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945). Deren describes the film as 'an effort to remove the dancer from the static space of a theatre stage to one which was as mobile and volatile as himself. It was, actually a duet – between Talley Beatty, who danced, and space, which was made to dance by means of the camera and cutting'.⁴⁹ For Deren, one of the main functions of *Study* was to define film dance in a way which distinguished it absolutely from theatrical dance, which it does by constituting movement outside real time and real space. As in *At Land*, however, radical spatiotemporal disjunctures are subordinated to the continuity provided by the locus of a single moving body. As Mark Franko puts it, Beatty 'dances through the disruption of montage' as the embodiment of an 'undialectical editing principle'.⁵⁰ The transformative potential of movement through discrepant spaces and times is further lost because the protagonist is not subjectified through the use of closeups and eyeline matches, as in *Meshes* and *At Land*, but instead functions (in medium and long-shot) as the incarnation of an abstract principle. Deren's production notes state that Beatty's movements should appear 'as if [the] dancer is under a larger compulsion, rather than as an extension of his own will'.⁵¹ Beatty dances *and is made to dance*, just as space is made to dance. Thus the appearance of doubles in the film is without uncanny connotations, because Beatty is already a double in an important sense. *Study* marks a significant point in Deren's progression towards depersonalized forms, which she associates with ritual, although it retains the embodied continuity of the single protagonist. In retrospect, Deren saw its theme as the assertion of movement over matter: 'I mean that movement, or energy, is more important, or more powerful, than space or matter – that, in fact, it creates matter'.⁵²

Time plays an interesting role in this celebration of the movement-image. Stan Brakhage has commented that the use of varied shooting speeds should be – but is not – the most noticeable thing about the film.⁵³ The most striking example of this is the gradual change of speed within a single shot (from 64 frames per second to 8 frames per second) while Beatty executes a dervish turn, so that, as Deren puts it: 'The movement, then, begins with a dream-like quality and ends up with the blurring of a machine part'.⁵⁴ Reverse motion is used too, to create an 'idealized leap which is unmarred by the effects of gravity'.⁵⁵ This use of the camera's motor to achieve variable speeds and styles of movement has the potential to introduce disruptive temporal effects, but does not fulfil this potential because it is pressed into the service of movement in space, as is made clear in Deren's eloquent description of the spatiotemporal dynamics of the film: 'Having accumulated intensity in small areas, the movement breaks out and spreads over a large area'.⁵⁶

The progressive abstraction of movement from the particularities of its execution is continued by *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), in which false continuity and match-cutting are applied to movements executed by

57 Deren, 'Ritual in transfigured time', in McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren*, pp. 225–6.

58 Maya Deren, 'Religious possession in dancing' (writing in 1942 as Eleonora Deren), in VèVè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman (eds), *The Legend of Maya Deren: a Documentary Biography and Collected Works, Volume I, Part One, Signatures (1917–42)* (New York, NY: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984), p. 496.

59 Deren, 'Ritual in transfigured time', p. 227.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

61 'From the notebook of Maya Deren, 1947', *October*, no. 14 (1980), p. 23.

62 Index card Moving Picture Medium II C (14), MDC, Box 6, Folder D.

several individuals instead of one, so that, as Deren puts it: 'shots are held together not by the constant identity of an individual performer, but by the emotional integrity of the movement itself, independent of its performer'.⁵⁷ The emphasis on the ensemble in *Ritual* can be seen to relate not only to Deren's interest in the depersonalizing effects of ritual but also to her understanding of the importance of community in dance. Her 1942 article 'Religious possession in dancing', written out of a desire to discover 'some reason for the intensity and vitality of such dancing which might conceivably be duplicated, with similar effects, in the dancing of our culture', concludes that the richness of Haitian dance derives from factors which cannot be reproduced outside the culture: 'The strength of still-living traditions, the integral organic relationship of dance to the entire culture, especially religion, the participation of the entire community'. In modern societies, Deren argues, dance has become a specialized form of individual self-expression, at the expense of its cultural vitality: 'it seems to me that dancing in our culture will benefit only as these losses are replaced or somehow compensated for'.⁵⁸ That *Ritual* is intended to answer this need is clear from Deren's statement of her intention to create a form which will fuse 'all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace'.⁵⁹ This fusion is effected less by match-cutting than by the 'transfigured time' of the film's title, as Deren points out:

Being a film ritual, it is achieved not only in spatial terms but in terms of a Time created by the camera. Time, here, is not an emptiness to be measured by a spatial activity which may fill it. On the contrary, in this film it not only actually creates many of the actions and events, but constitutes the special integrity of the form as a whole.⁶⁰

The use of slow motion, repetition, freeze frame and editing, which breaks up and reassembles actions to create what Deren often termed 'cubism in time', transforms a group of disparate and banal actions into a mysterious communal rite of passage.

It is around 1946–7 that ideas about time become especially prominent in Deren's thought, and although she never fully elaborates these ideas as theories, some useful inferences about the nature and direction of her thinking can be made. Notes that she made in 1947 in response to a lecture by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson indicate that the principle of relativity influenced her thinking even on such topics as the importance of time in models of ritual behaviour: 'TIME TIME TIME – not SPACE. ENERGY – not MATTER'.⁶¹ A similar trope occurs in her working notes for the 'Anagram': 'MOTOR DRIVEN. THIS IS WHAT IS NEW – MATTER IS ENERGY. MATTER IS TIME'.⁶² At the risk of extrapolating too much from these jottings, it may be suggested that they support an interpretation of *Ritual* which turns on the transformation, in time and through movement, of matter into energy and which parallels this transformation with the cinematographic transformation of matter into images.

⁶³ Deren, 'Ritual in transfigured time', p. 227.

⁶⁴ Index card MPM III B, MDC, Box 6, Folder D.

⁶⁵ Deren, 'Ritual in transfigured time', p. 225.

⁶⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, 'To Maya Deren', in P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1970), p. 86.

In the absence of a cohesive religious tradition or community, Deren turns to technological modernity as the shared condition of her era in order to generate collective ritual. Her comment that such communal efforts 'are usually reserved for the accomplishment of some critical metamorphosis, and, above all, for some inversion towards life'⁶³ sheds an interesting light on her use of film techniques: tropes such as the statue which comes to life and the transformation of a widow into a bride thematize the cinematic uncanny, which she mobilizes by slowing, stilling and reversing movement (if, as she comments in her notes for 'Anagram', 'life is movement',⁶⁴ then stillness, conversely, connotes death). *Ritual* thus turns on a contradiction: in her efforts to reinvigorate dance in film, by drawing on the specific means of expression of the medium and the collective state of the culture, Deren inadvertently draws on some of the negative fantasies of the machine age, which revolve around alienation and the life-threatening propensities of technology; whence, perhaps, the residual theme of the lone protagonist (Deren/Christiani) in flight from a threatening community and taking refuge in the sea. It might also be said that by figuring a cocktail party as a 'constant moving pattern of smiling, social anxiety', Deren constructs an alienating ritual as much as a ritual to guard against alienation.⁶⁵ As with *Meshes*, *Ritual* is animated by an unresolved tension between holism and estrangement figured aesthetically, in Deleuze's and Worringer's terms, as antagonism between organic and crystalline forms.

In this context, Rudolf Arnheim's explanation of Deren's reasons for travelling to Haiti, not long after *Ritual* was completed, to undertake field research into Voudoun seems especially insightful:

Maya Deren was always interested in ritual. She went to Haiti in search of the remnants of a culture in which the symbolism of the human gesture and of the space in which the body moves was still standardized by what psychologists call 'consensual validation'. We, in the New York of the twentieth century, no longer profit from that sort of consensus. Our common standards are reduced to the practical. But we are still accessible to a picture language that, half-shrouded in personal meanings, half-revealed by common sensation, can call upon us, distant though the caller may be.⁶⁶

What Arnheim describes here, and what Deren seemed to be seeking, again accords quite closely with the hypostatized space of the action-image. Deren's anthropological study of Haitian Voudoun, *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti*, offers further insights into Deren's attraction to ritual. The book's subtitle is significant – the gods are living not only because possession grants them embodiment, but also because the worship of ancestors alongside the gods – the invocation of *les morts* as well as *les mystères* – links worshippers and deities by actual bloodlines. Deren describes possession as the central point from which 'surges the lavish arterial river of ancestral blood which bears all racial history forward into the contemporary moment and funnels its vast

67 Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti* (New York, NY: McPherson, 2001), p. 247.

68 Ibid., p. 21.

69 Ibid., p. 171.

70 Ibid., p. 240.

71 Ibid., p. 77.

72 Ibid., p. 99.

73 'From the notebook of Maya Deren, 1947', p. 25.

74 Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, p. 6.

accumulations into the denim-dressed serviteur'.⁶⁷ Living tradition also provides a way of organizing more immediate experience: 'Myth is the facts of the mind made manifest in a fiction of matter'.⁶⁸ Religion has practical functions, transposing physical processes into metaphysical processions and ordering cosmic events into intelligible patterns. Deren comments, for example, on the purpose served by psychosomatic illness and its Voudoun cures: 'psychosomatic projection serves not as an evasion but as a means of making the moral problem accessible on a level of real action'.⁶⁹ She compares the religious belief in pervasive logical causation with the underlying premiss of scientific investigation and argues that technology does not displace ritual by granting superior control over the environment, but, rather, so instrumentalizes human relationships that the collectivity which fosters ritual disappears.

Deren's insistence that Voudoun is not something one believes in but something one *does* emphasizes two important dimensions of ritual practice: the importance of the collective and the leading role of the body. Religious experience in Voudoun, she claims, is not a matter of individual conscience, but of collective action and physical movement. Dance is not virtuoso self-expression but formalized belonging, designed not to express but to induce specific mental states, summed up in the phrase 'dance as the meditation of the body'.⁷⁰ At the same time, she recognizes the encroaching effects of modernity on Haitian culture: 'The Haitian approaches the moment when, as in so many of our "civilized" cultures, man will come to feel himself singular, alone and pitted against a hostile universe'.⁷¹ Deren encountered Haitian Voudoun in the twilight of its gods, 'as if in coming westwards the Africans had left behind the morning and noon of their own destiny, the promise and power of their own history'.⁷² The spatial and temporal dimensions of Voudoun, as Deren explains them, are powerful articulations of resistance to colonial oppression and to the organization of spatial and temporal experience by western modernity. In Deren's account, one of the most important functions of Voudoun rituals is to preserve a traditional relationship between memory and action in which collectivity guards against the depredations of time.

Deren's field trips to Haiti had a profound effect on her as an artist and an intellectual. When, in 1947, Sasha Hamid broached the idea that she might become a professional anthropologist, her reply was: 'I would never be satisfied analyzing the nature of a given reality but would want to make my own'.⁷³ In 1953, in the preface to *Divine Horsemen*, she recants this position:

I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.⁷⁴

75 'From the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947', p. 39.

76 Maya Deren, Haiti Journal, 28 September 1947, quoted in Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics*, pp. 158–9.

77 'From the notebook of Maya Deren, 1947', p. 23.

78 Cleveland Lecture, p. 67.

79 Maya Deren, 'Meditation on Violence', *Film Culture*, no. 39 (1965), p. 18.

80 Chao Li Chi interview in *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren/In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (Martina Kudláček, Austria/Czech Republic/Switzerland/Germany, 2002).

Her encounter with anthropology seems to have initiated a crucial change in her film work, which shows up particularly in her attitude to the long take. Recounting the process of viewing Bateson's Balinese footage, she describes how a particularly uneventful long takes first bores her, then induces 'a kind of suspended state of mind'. In such shots, she claims, 'just because nothing is happening in the developmental sense, and just because the shot keeps lasting, the scene crosses some strange boundary from "activity" into "state"'.⁷⁵ After beginning filming in Haiti she notes 'that one falsifies not only by segmenting space, but equally when one segments time', though she doubts that spectators could be made to sit through an uneventful fifteen-minute take.⁷⁶ In Haiti, Deren developed a reverence for the integrity of reality which led her in the direction of a cinema of duration, but her scepticism about the patience of audiences prevented her from realizing the full potential of the long take.

Meditation on Violence (1948) was made after Deren's first sojourn in Haiti. Both a time study and an ethnographic film of sorts, it explores metamorphosis as a temporal phenomenon and a metaphysical principle. In 1947 Deren reached the conclusion that metamorphosis was an important concept in her film theory: 'It is how time operates on a two-dimensional surface'.⁷⁷ In a lecture given in 1951 she explains how she saw her film work at this time:

I had been trying to extend into metaphysical extension; that film is changing, metamorphic; that is, infinite; the idea that the movement of life is totally important rather than a single life. My films were built on an incline, an increase in intensity. I hoped to make a form which was infinite, the changingness of things.⁷⁸

Like *Study*, *Meditation* is a film with a deceptively simple appearance and a complex theoretical armature. Deren created a number of diagrams of the film's structure, showing it as a parabolic curve, cross-sectioned by lines representing changes in form and content at various points (see figures 1–3). These diagrammatic representations indicate that, in order to manipulate time, Deren first had to conceptualize it spatially.

In the film, a young Chinese-American, Chao Li Chi, performs Wudang Tai Chi and Shaolin Kung Fu. The appeal for Deren of these martial arts (which she knew as 'Chinese boxing') derives from the idea that they embody 'a physical statement of certain metaphysical concepts' associated with the *I Ching* and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*.⁷⁹ Chao Li Chi explains that the meaning of the term 'Tai Chi' is 'ultimate form', and that the ultimate form is that which contains all possible forms, because it is in constant motion and change.⁸⁰ Tai Chi is popularly considered to have been developed from Shaolin Kung Fu by the Taoist priest Zhang San Feng in thirteenth-century China. The differences between the two styles are often described in terms of hard or external approaches requiring localized strength and speed (Shaolin Kung Fu) and soft or internal approaches emphasizing mind power and intrinsic energy flow (Tai Chi). Deren was particularly impressed by the idea of internal force as opposed

MEDITATION ON VIOLENCE

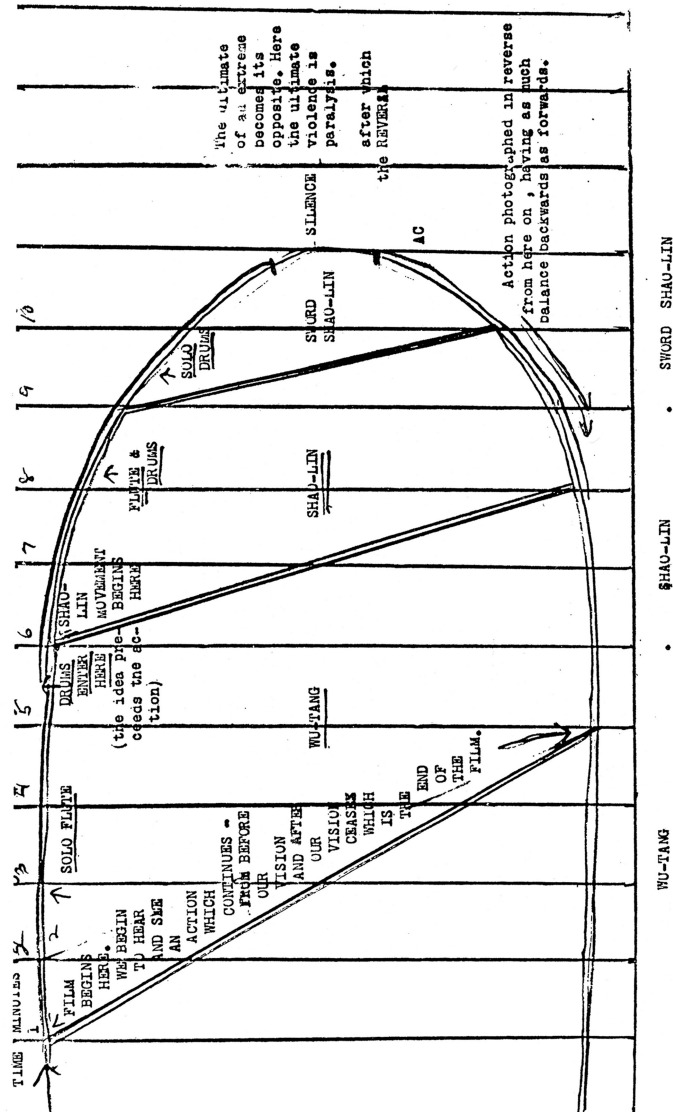


Fig. 1
Images courtesy Anthology Film
Archives. Published in *Film
culture*, no. 39 (1965), pp. 21-2.

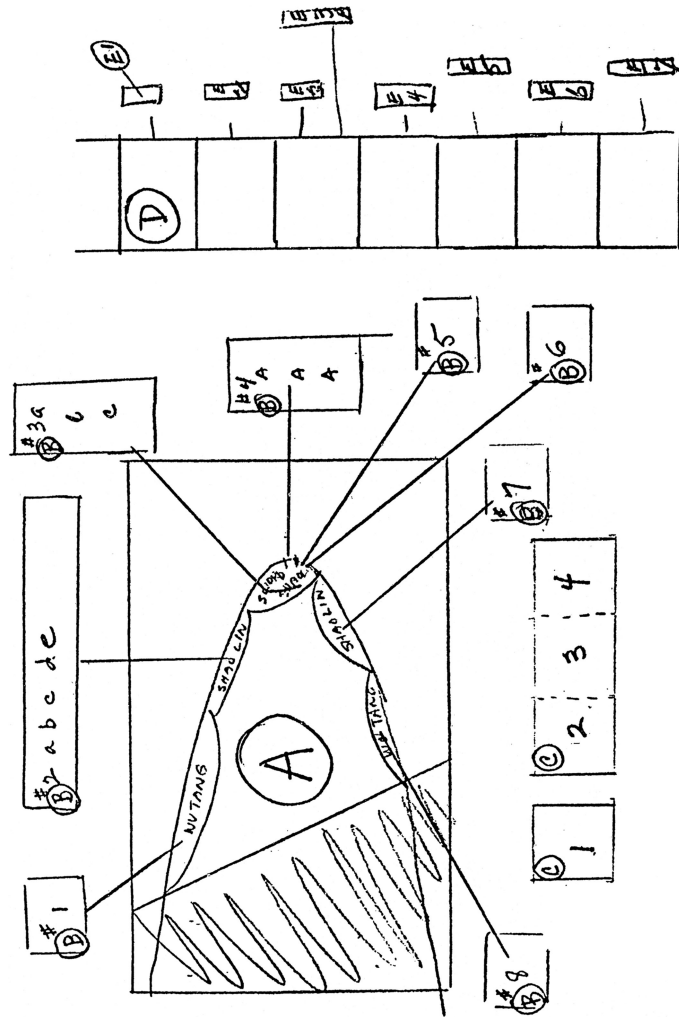


Fig. 2

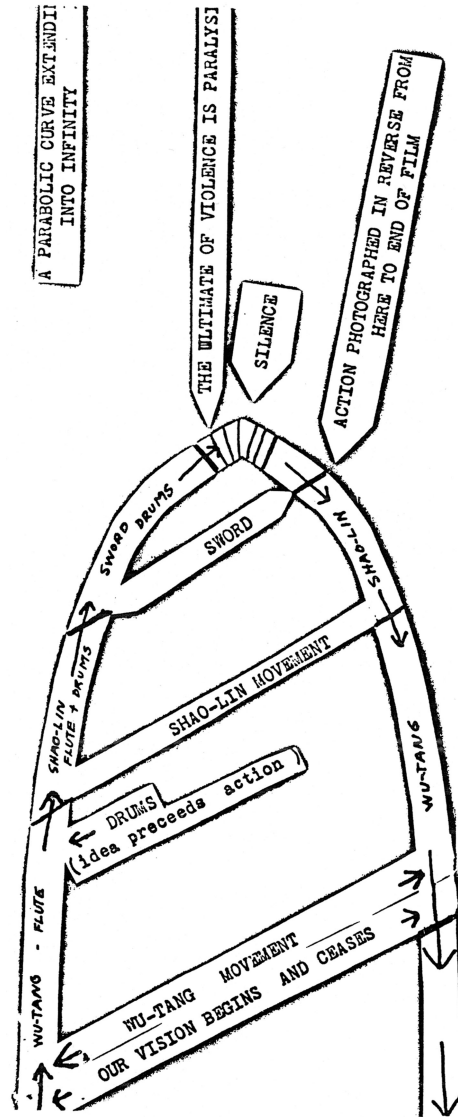


Fig. 3

81 Deren, 'Meditation on Violence', p. 18.

82 Yale Lecture, p. 25.

83 Ibid., p. 29.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., p. 30.

86 Ibid., Q&A session, n.p.

87 Deren, 'Cinematography: the creative use of reality', p. 121.

to brute strength, describing in her text on the film the way in which 'instead of arriving at any extreme extension – a point from which there would be need to recover balance and *élan* of power – the movements always round back upon themselves before they have lost their dynamic flow'.⁸¹ By pairing Tai Chi and Kung Fu, Deren opens up the possibility for two types of transformation, as each movement gives way to the next, but also as soft gives way to hard, internal to external, yin to yang.

The meditation in question is accomplished not only by Chao Li Chi's movements, which, Deren emphasizes, are training for violence rather than violence itself, but also by the camera, which circles Chao Li Chi 'as a meditation that one circles around an idea'.⁸² The film is open at the beginning and end, slicing into a continuum which extends before and beyond it, and the movements of the camera and Chao Li Chi towards and away from each other are intended to follow the rhythmic breathing which accompanies the movements. Camera movements and edits are smooth and flowing, and long takes and slightly slow motion add to the fluid continuity. In the Tai Chi section of the film Chao Li Chi ignores the camera, but in the Kung Fu section, and especially in the sword section, he confronts it: 'the camera becomes the opponent, the adversary and has to duck under the sword and becomes very mobile in its effort to relate to this fighting man here'.⁸³ A sense of active conflict is generated by the film accelerating to normal speed and then slightly beyond, and by the use of short-takes, abrupt movements and very slight ellipses in the editing, 'so that the hand is quicker than the eye as if you had blinked'.⁸⁴ At the height of the conflict, freeze-frame is used to extend movement into its opposite, stasis. Deren explains: 'The movement gets more and more violent and the extreme of violence tips over and goes into its opposite and becomes a point of paralysis'.⁸⁵ When movement restarts, it is reversed, returning Chao Li Chi to his previous, less aggressive, state. Just as *Study* was a duet, *Meditation* becomes a duel, which the camera fights by filmic means. Music is used to reinforce this structure, with a Chinese flute solo (which Deren intended as an expression of spiritual qualities) in the Tai Chi sections, to which Haitian drumming (intended to invoke the pulse of physicality) is added just before the Kung Fu section, which then becomes a drum solo, before reverting to the flute again.

In discussion of the film, Deren insists that reverse motion in *Meditation* signifies 'movement of the camera in time rather than in space'.⁸⁶ Elsewhere, she describes reverse motion as conveying less a backward movement in space than 'an undoing of time'.⁸⁷ The curved space which constitutes one of the film's three settings (created with photographic paper in Deren's apartment) seems intended to evoke the curved space of relativity theory, and is paralleled by the curvature of film time described by Deren's diagram of the film's form. However, given the staging of this spatiotemporal figure under Newtonian conditions, its meaning is purely analogical. Deren comments that 'the extraordinary thing about this type of movement is that it is as much in

balance when you see it backwards as when you see it forward',⁸⁸ and it is true that to the casual observer, the introduction of reverse motion into the film might be barely perceptible at a physical level, although it signifies clearly in cultural terms by altering the form and sequencing of the martial arts movements. In *Meditation*'s analogical structure, Deren concatenates the ideas of the complementarity of yin and yang, the physics of the body in motion, the reversibility of time in relativity theory and the reversibility of movement in film. In designing these analogies, however, she overlooks the fact that the martial arts forms she is working with are organized in terms of culturally specific signs (patterns with names like 'Gracefully Receiving the Way' and 'Returning to Cosmos at Wudang'), which are themselves expressions of spatial and temporal relations, and which lose their meanings in reverse. The terms of the analogy thus contradict each other, revealing that in order to 'undo time', the film moves through time *as if it were space*.

Perhaps surprisingly, Stan Brakhage describes *Meditation* as Deren's most personal film:

She doesn't appear in the film, but she is the camera, she is moving, she is breathing in relationship to this dancer, she is composing so that the shadow, or the three shadows or at times the no shadow of this dance against the background are an integral part of the dance. Every kind of quality, of texture is a really felt part of the frame, so I feel this is very personal.⁸⁹

89 Stan Brakhage interview in Kudláček, *Im Spiegel der Maya* Deren.

Brakhage reads *Meditation* as an anticipation of his own use of the camera in personal films such as *Sirius Remembered* (1959), where the combined movements of the camera and his body generate intense physical and personal self-expression in the tradition of Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist action painting. While Deren disliked the idea of personal filmmaking, she was interested in the prosthetic appropriation of the camera: 'for me, this physical contact with the film instrument seems always to have been initially important . . . the Bolex, with the vibration of the motor running down my arm'.⁹⁰ In *Meditation*, this prosthetic effect mirrors the relationship between the martial artist and his weapon: 'the increasing violence bursts into extension: the arm sprouts a sword'.⁹¹ The camera, however, defeats the sword by virtue of its ultimate control of movement in space and time. In *Meditation*, Deren initiated a form of action filmmaking, in which the camera's capacity to remake spatial and temporal reality is thematized as artistic agency. Yet the film's temporal system contains an intrinsic conflict: the irreversibility of Chao Li Chi's performance considered from a cultural perspective points to the irreversibility of duration, undermining the time-symmetry which Deren imposes on his movements. As Hulme puts it (in an essay which Deren is likely to have read): '*Real duration, real time* is an absolute thing which cannot be contracted or hastened because in it *real work* is being done, really new things are appearing'.⁹² The flowing long takes and smooth matches on action of *Meditation* are

90 'From the notebook of Maya Deren, 1947', p. 22.

91 Deren, '*Meditation on Violence*', p. 18.

92 T.E. Hulme, 'The philosophy of intensive manifolds', in *Speculations*, p. 196.

intended to safeguard the integrity of Chao Li Chi's gestures; but the mobile camera, varied film speeds and reverse motion set up an antagonistic relationship between film and performer, and ultimately deprive his movements of agency and meaning. Time, however, remains subordinate to movement insofar as the camera assumes the place of the protagonist in the sensory-motor schema, moving purposefully through space and time. Deren grapples with the problem of imaging time in *Meditation*, but conceptualizes it as a geometric parameter, flexible and divisible, a fourth dimension of space. Her conception of time here parallels Einstein's in remaining within a determinist universe, excluding invention and uncertainty, the hallmarks of real time.

Direct analogy between physics and metaphysics also informs *The Very Eye of Night* (1959), the film which Deren describes as her 'Sputnik':

I brought it up at about the same time the original Sputnik went up, and it took me just about the same amount of time to get it up, because there were so many technical problems to be solved in the making of it.⁹³

Conceptually, the film is organized by a parallel between outer space and 'the inner universe of man': 'The laws, qualities and structure of this microcosm are like those of the macrocosm: its space and time is limitless, but in both there is an imperturbable logic'.⁹⁴ The film is printed in the negative, in order to remove the horizon line, so that the figures in it move without reference to a gravitational centre. Fluid and multidirectional camera movements make the white forms of dancers fly against a star-spangled black background. Deren's notes outline a narrative for the film in which a somnambulist ascends to the heavens and encounters a second self and a female partner among the stars. Brakhage describes the film, which he claims was widely misunderstood, as 'a ritual of her culture',⁹⁵ in recognition of the fact that, along with Deren's characteristic syncretic cultural mix (Voudoun cosmology, Indonesian and Haitian musical instruments, Chinese theology), it invokes mainstream western cultural traditions including astronomy, classical ballet and Greek mythology. In discussion of the film, Deren seems to contradict herself, attributing mechanistic certainty to its depiction of cosmic relationships, and existential uncertainty to its metaphorical portrayal of the modern condition (lost in space).⁹⁶ Within the increasingly depersonalized, materialist trajectory of her work, however, this apparent contradiction is reconcilable: individual consciousness is decentred by the higher forces of the physical universe. The greater space surrounding the dancers' bodies and their function as elements within a high-contrast graphic pattern emphasizes the fact that human dynamism is no longer the organizing principle of this dance film, in which the most sweeping movements are generated by the camera. The film's concluding movement, the Icarus-like fall of the somnambulist (the effect of camera movement), resulting from his attempt to act independently of the constellation which surrounds him,

⁹³ Vanderbilt Film Symposium, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Maya Deren, 'Original notes for *Eye of Night* Scenario', *Film Culture*, no. 39 (1965), p. 24.

⁹⁵ Stan Brakhage interview in Kudláček, *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren*.

⁹⁶ Vanderbilt Film Symposium.

97 Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*, p. 81.

encapsulates the ineffectuality of human gesture. The sidereal movement of *The Very Eye of Night*, governed by general principles rather than individual consciousness, is far removed from the anthropocentric dynamism of Deren's early films. Rather than centres of indetermination (as Bergson describes human subjects), the dancers are elements of a determinist system, moving in concert. As Deleuze says of Vertov's eye, Deren's eye of night is 'the eye of matter, the eye in matter, not subject to time, which has "conquered" time, which reaches the "negative of time", and which knows no other whole than the material universe and its extension'.⁹⁷ In her last completed film, Deren thus pursues mechanistic movement to its logical conclusion.

As an artist filmmaker of the 1940s, Deren was working in a form which was in crisis, on the point of a transformation. The terms in which she understood the historical imperatives of her period are different from those subsequently imposed by Deleuze in his *Cinema* books, but not inconsistent with them. The idea that scientific and technological change has repercussions throughout the culture is as integral to Deleuze's theory as it is to Deren's work:

What I'm interested in are the relations between the arts, science, and philosophy. There's no order of priority among these disciplines. Each is creative. The true object of science is to create functions, the true object of art is to create sensory aggregates, and the object of philosophy is to create concepts. From this viewpoint, given these general heads, however sketchy, of function, aggregate, and concept, we can pose the question of echoes and resonances between them. How is it possible – in their completely different lines of development, with quite different rhythms and movements of production – how is it possible for a concept, an aggregate, and a function to interact?⁹⁸

98 Deleuze, 'Mediators', in *Negotiations*, pp. 123–4.

Deren was not the first to note the special relationship between cinema and time, but was astute in insisting that, historically, the moment had come to explore this affinity. Her interest in science led her towards the most influential scientific model of her day, relativity theory, but this deflected her understanding of time in the direction of movement. Like Einstein, she held to a paradigm which her earliest discoveries had actually undermined: just as he refused to believe that God played dice, she refused to accept the obsolescence of the organic regime. Her belief that organic aesthetics could counteract the alienation of modernity was reinforced by her interest in ritual and her experiences with Haitian Voudoun. These two influences on her thought converge in the tendency to spatialize time. Where time is not spatialized in her films, it tends to assume a threatening aspect (death and the uncanny in *Meshes* and *Ritual*). Paradoxically, it is in these moments that she comes closest to creating modern ritual, in touching on the fractured experience of the self in time, partly because this is how the modern subject intuitively feels time, and partly because through intertextual references to the literature of the

99 Arnheim, 'To Maya Deren', p. 86

100 Letter to James Card, p. 31

uncanny and the imagery of film noir and melodrama, she employs the vestigially mythical forms which Arnheim calls 'picture language ... half-shrouded in personal meanings, half-revealed by common sensation'.⁹⁹ Her relationship to these popular idioms was complicated by her contradictory relationship with femininity and her resistance to passive forms of identification, as well as by her aesthetics. The further Deren moved from the subjective apprehension of time (and its effectively autobiographical expressions), the further she moved from conceiving time as duration, as an indivisible qualitative multiplicity. Inspired by the technoscience of her day, she created new movement-images of spatial and temporal exploration. Deren saw this work as a kind of research, and was only partially satisfied with the results of her later films. She compares *Meditation*, as an attempt 'to abstract the principle of ongoing metamorphosis and change', unfavourably with *Ritual* and *Study*, and had plans to re-edit the film. Although she was more satisfied with *The Very Eye of Night*, she comments that 'there truly seems no place to go from here, at least in the same direction'.¹⁰⁰ Deren's ambition to create a movement-image in which time was the most prominent dimension sounds paradoxical today, but in the 1940s and 1950s would have appeared as the frontier of experimental film practice.

Research for this article was assisted by the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Leave Scheme.

Screen

48:1 Spring 2007

issue editor

Annette Kuhn

ALISON BUTLER: 'Motor-driven metaphysics': movement, time and action in the films of Maya Deren **1**

SAM DIORIO: Total cinema: *Chronique d'un été* and the end of Bazinian film theory **25**

MASHA SALAZKINA: Addressing the dialectics of sexual difference in Eisenstein's *Que viva México!* **45**

BELÉN VIDAL: Feminist historiographies and the woman artist's biopic: the case of *Artemisia* **69**

translation

BÉLA BALÁZS: New translation by Rodney Livingstone of extracts from *Der sichtbare Mensch/Visible Man* (1924), with introduction by Erica Carter **91**

debate

RICHARD RUSHTON: Absorption and theatricality in the cinema: some thoughts on narrative and spectacle **109**

reviews

MARY ANN DOANE: Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* **113**

AMY HERZOG: David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* **119**

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL: Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914–1918* **125**

KATHLEEN M. GOUGH: Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture* **131**

ALISON PEIRSE: Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy* **137**

cover illustration

Eisenstein with a sugar skull. Picture courtesy Mexican Picture Partnership

Total cinema: *Chronique d'un été* and the end of Bazinian film theory

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In retrospect, Jean Rouch's and Edgar Morin's 1961 film *Chronique d'un été/Chronicle of a Summer* can be read as the snapshot of a moment in which cultural, theoretical and technological discourses are caught in the process of crystallization. *Chronique's* historical importance to French cinema is incontestable: it is the first French feature to debate the Algerian war openly; it is one of the only ones at this time to include actual footage of factory workers on the shopfloor; it poses prescient questions about decolonization, and it contains an early instance of Holocaust testimony. The film raises these issues as part of a larger attempt to craft a 'true' representation of everyday life in Paris. Of all its innovations, it is this desire to realize what its directors called a new 'cinema verite' which has had the farthest-reaching consequences for film production and film theory.

Like the other terms they used to describe the project – *cinéma direct*, *cinéma de fraternité*, *cinéma de sincérité* – cinema verite hints at the open, straightforward connection Rouch and Morin tried to establish with their protagonists and their audience. Their efforts at direct communication had a dual impact. On the one hand, *Chronique* had a practical effect: by shooting their film with cameras and microphones that had never before been used in France, its directors helped to inaugurate a documentary aesthetic built around improvisation, handheld equipment and synchronized sound. On the other hand, the film also shaped the critical discourse of its time: its attempts at transparency set off virulent debates about the relationship between cinema, reality and truth.

This essay maintains that there is a strong connection between the technological changes *Chronique* introduces at the beginning of the 1960s and the theoretical shift in French film criticism which takes place over the course of the decade. This period sees a move away from the Bazin-inspired aesthetics of phenomenological realism promoted in journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* during the 1950s. By 1969, the same journals had largely abandoned their phenomenological convictions in favour of materialist approaches to film that focused not on the 'innate' meaning of sound and image (film as experience) but on the production and arrangement of filmic elements (film as language). The central issue in this debate was mimesis: if the earlier position argued that the cinema could show the world, the later one harboured a profound suspicion of the medium's capacity for representation.

Rouch's and Morin's film embodies aspects of each of these positions. While it manifests a humanist faith in film's capacity for direct communication, it also challenges the credibility of its own message on structural and thematic levels. The following pages explore the implications of this fundamental incoherence. The first half of this essay places the film in its historical context: rather than connect it with the French documentary tradition, I argue that it is more closely related to the move towards the contemporary world made by the critics-turned-filmmakers of the New Wave. If *Chronique* prolongs the thirst for realism in early New Wave features, however, it also points to the limitations of their aesthetic. In doing so, it offers no better solution: in fact, by attempting to draw even closer to the world, it eventually undermines its claim to truth. The second half of the essay draws on a close reading of editing patterns and a discussion of texts by Morin and Rouch to examine how the film's illusion of authenticity gradually collapses. By essentially documenting a phenomenological failure, *Chronique* anticipates the radical anti-illusionism of post-1968 film theory. This essay is a first attempt at analyzing its place within the slow transition from one conception of cinema to the other.

While the opening credits explicitly situate the film in 1960s Paris, *Chronique d'un été*'s images of the city are barely recognizable. With few exceptions, Rouch and Morin avoid the iconographic shots of monuments and tourist attractions that were mainstays of Paris documentaries of this period.¹ This absence is indicative of their approach: rather than dwell on familiar symbols, their work focuses first on individuals. The film is organized around a group of protagonists largely composed of the filmmakers' friends and acquaintances. This mostly young, generally leftist, group consisted of French and African students such as Jean-Pierre Sergent, Modeste Landry and Régis Debray, sociological consultants such as Marceline Loridan, office staff such as *Cahiers du cinéma* secretary Marilù Parolini and factory workers such as Renault employees Angelo Borgien and Jacques Gautrat.² It also included the directors themselves: Rouch was an anthropologist who had

¹ The city's monuments feature prominently in numerous 1950s documentaries about Paris. See, for example, François Reichenbach's *Visage de Paris* (1956).

² Although it is not apparent in the film, many of these individuals were politically active. Gautrat, for example, was affiliated with the radical leftist group *Socialisme ou barbarie*, and had attracted attention for *Journal d'un ouvrier*, the book he published with Les Éditions de Minuit under the name Daniel Mothé.

been making prizewinning ethnographic films in West Africa since the mid 1940s. Morin, a sociologist, was perhaps best known as the director of the review *Arguments*, and as the author of several important books: two of these (*Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* and *Les stars*) dealt with film, and a third (*Autocritique*) was a memoir of his engagement with, and exclusion from, the French Communist Party.

Rouch and Morin filmed their subjects for more than six months, accumulating over twenty-four hours of raw material which was edited into a ninety-minute feature. The working title for the project was *Comment vis-tu?* [How do you live?]. As this title suggests, the directors envisioned their film as an intimate dialogue between equals. Accordingly, much of it is composed of lengthy conversations in which the protagonists admit satisfaction or, more frequently, confess profound discontent, with the past, present and future. These sequences are organized around closeups: faces fill the screen, blown up excessively large so that even the smallest tics and most subtle movements are made visible. By using form to confirm an intimate focus, the film doubly guarantees privileged access to private lives.

Although *Chronique* emphasizes bodies and faces, its individuals are never completely individualized. Rather than tell all, Rouch and Morin populate the film with semi-anonymous subjects in the hope of going beyond particularized truths and suggesting the reality of Paris as a whole. This tendency to move from concrete situations to broader abstractions hints at the film's debt to phenomenology, the philosophical movement at the heart of postwar French intellectual life. In particular, the relationship between cinema and the real world here evokes positions associated with critic André Bazin. Bazin's writing elaborates an articulate and powerful defence of cinematic realism that is nourished by a commitment to this philosophical approach.

This connection is worth analyzing in more detail. Phenomenology starts from the conviction that the essential truths governing existence can only be grasped through the direct experience of things themselves. In that it understands the world through the impressions of the individual, it is grounded in a Cartesian notion of subjectivity. At the same time, however, the ideal phenomenological subject is an 'empty' one devoid of specific psychological traits. In the 1940s and 1950s, French phenomenology generally ignored the influence of factors such as age, class, gender and cultural background. Its problematic aim was to arrive at universal knowledge, to discover the patterns of consciousness common to all human beings. The issue at the heart of this approach, then, was the relationship between self and world; that is, between subjective impressions and collective experience. For philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty the frontier between these spheres is extremely fluid: it is through the particular that one arrives at an understanding of fundamental categories of being. Relying equally on emotional intuition and analytical insight,

3 For further discussion of phenomenology's impact on twentieth-century French thought, see Chapters 1–3 of Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 65–9.

4 See Dudley Andrew, 'The neglected tradition of phenomenology in film theory', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, vol. II (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 625–32.

5 Pascal Bonitzer, 'L'écran du fantôme' [1972], in Antoine de Baecque and Gabrielle Lucantonio (eds), *Théories du cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001), p. 89. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

6 Philip Rosen, 'History of image, image of history: subject and ontology in Bazin', in Ivone Margulies (ed.), *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 42–79.

7 Louis Skorecki, *Raoul Walsh et moi, suivi de Contre la nouvelle cinéphilie* (Paris: PUF, 2001), p. 62.

8 André Bazin, 'The myth of total cinema' [1946], in *What is Cinema?*, vol. I, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 20. Bazin's notion of Total Cinema is indebted to René Barjavel's earlier book, *Le cinéma total: essai sur les formes futures du cinéma* (Paris: Denöel, 1944), which proposes a slightly different definition of the term.

phenomenology deciphers the world not by thinking about it but by encountering it.³

Bazin's criticism consistently frames cinema as a phenomenological tool. In well-known essays such as 'The evolution of the language of cinema', he praises films that allow spectators to experience events in the same way as they would in life. Underpinning his argument is the belief that, when faced with a 'random' series of onscreen events, the viewer's consciousness would gradually come to understanding. While never forgetting that cinema was a construct, this essay maintains that the greatest films were able to maintain an *illusion* of non-intervention and that, at its best, the cinematic image could act as a window onto a coherent and convincingly real world.

Bazin was neither the first nor the only critic during this period to make such claims. His writing fits into what Dudley Andrew has recognized as a strong phenomenological current in postwar French film criticism, one that includes intellectuals such as Amédée Ayfre, Gilbert Cohen-Séat and Morin himself.⁴ While it would be wrong to call any of these figures 'Bazinian' theorists, it is also true that the phenomenological dimension of their work relies on notions of realism and spectatorship that found their widest audience through Bazin. Given the extent of his influence, it is Bazin, more than any other writer, who provided the template for phenomenological film criticism in France. Addressing the move away from this approach, then, means coming to terms with the way he was understood in the 1960s.

The decade following Bazin's death saw the almost hagiographic praise surrounding his work give way to a series of pointed critiques. Despite this shift in reception, the understanding of his writing does not change: what is at stake is not the meaning of his ideas but their value. Pro-Bazinian texts such as Eric Rohmer's 'The "sum" of André Bazin' are fundamentally similar to negative assessments such as Pascal Bonitzer's 'The screen of fantasy' since, for each writer, the essence of Bazinian cinema lies in its capacity to spark what Bonitzer calls 'the epiphany of the tangible real'.⁵ By insisting on film's inherent connection to an objective world, this reading of Bazin flattens the complexity of a body of work that, as Philip Rosen has suggested, is equally anchored in notions of ellipsis and subjectivity.⁶ Nevertheless, it constitutes the essential reference in a period in which, as Louis Skorecki indicates, the central concern for budding critics was the possibility of cinematic transparency.⁷ A key text in this regard, and the one most important in the present context, is 'The myth of total cinema'.

In this well-known essay, Bazin envisions film as an outgrowth of a deep biological need for mimesis. The medium becomes the latest in a series of successive approximations of desire, of an innate craving for what he calls Total Cinema, that is, 'a total and complete representation of reality . . . a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief'.⁸ He argues that this passion for mimesis is responsible for the creation of the movie camera and subsequent technical advancements

such as sound, colour and CinemaScope. More importantly, it also forms the point of origin for the ontological link that Bazin's work forcefully establishes between cinema and the real. In moving film nearer to the world, each technological development better satisfied what he saw as an instinctive (and fundamentally insatiable) thirst for representation.

Chronique d'un été's quest for a 'true' representation of Paris responds directly to Bazin's unrealizable dream of Total Cinema. By trying to draw technically and metaphysically closer to the city, it is in step with a much broader current in French film at this time. Although Rouch and Morin situate their work within a tradition of non-fiction filmmaking that starts with Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), its closest domestic counterparts were early features by the first-time directors of the New Wave. Since the project had no contemporary documentary equivalent in France, *Chronique d'un été* should also be read in terms of the realist aesthetic popularized by Bazin and disseminated in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* by young critics who would later form the core of this movement.⁹

Rouch and Morin propose a singular approach to what by 1960 had already become a key component of New Wave discourse. In a recent article, Michael Rothberg persuasively demonstrates the connections between their method and opposition to the Algerian War during the late 1950s and early 1960s. While Rothberg is certainly correct to argue that 'a discourse of "truth" was circulating in proximity to anti-colonial struggles at the moment when Rouch and Morin were creating the new cinema-vérité', the notion of truth also held a definite aesthetic value during the same period.¹⁰ More specifically, verité was a cardinal virtue for certain writers at *Cahiers*.

When critics like Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette declared French film formally and thematically bankrupt in the mid 1950s, they called for 'true' images of modern France which would contest the false ones disseminated in mainstream productions. The formula was simple: if Truffaut argued that 'French cinema is being crushed to death by false legends' and Godard denounced '*la technique fausse*' of directors like Yves Allégret and Claude Autant-Lara, the New Wave was resolutely positioned as 'the true face of French cinema'.¹¹ Accordingly, the films these critics went on to make were laden with a burden of authenticity: Claude Chabrol, the first of the *Cahiers* critics to direct a feature, emphasized that '[in cinema] there are no major or minor subjects . . . there is only truth'.¹²

This ambiguous notion of truth was anchored in a particular conception of realism. Of all the New Wave filmmakers, the *Cahiers* group was the one most strongly indebted to Bazin's realist mythology. As critics, the directors they admired were those who, in their opinion, simply showed the world. In his article 'Genius of Howard Hawks', for example, Rivette concluded that the superiority of Hawks's films lay in their materiality: 'he proves movement by walking, existence by

9 Rouch's and Morin's insistence on direct sound and mobile cameras brings the film closer to experimental documentary efforts such as *La vie commence demain* (Nicole Vedrès, 1949), *Lourdes et ses miracles* (Georges Rouquier, 1955) or *Le Monde du silence* (Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956). While similar in spirit to *Chronique d'un été*, however, the subjects of these films are far from the Parisian everyday.

10 Michael Rothberg, 'The work of decolonization: *Chronicle of a Summer*, cinema vérité, and the emergence of the holocaust survivor', *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 5 (2004), p. 1241.

11 François Truffaut, 'Vous êtes tous témoins dans ce procès: le cinéma français crève sous les fausses légendes' [1957], in *Le plaisir des yeux* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 234; Jean-Luc Godard, 'Exclu l'an dernier du Festival, Truffaut représentera la France à Cannes avec *Les 400 Coups*' [1958], in Alain Bergala (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, vol. I (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), pp. 194, 193.

12 Claude Chabrol, 'Les petits sujets', *Cahiers du cinéma*, vol. 17, no. 100 (1959), p. 41.

13 Jacques Rivette, 'Génie de Howard Hawks' [1953], in Antoine de Baecque and Gabrielle Lucantonio (eds), *Le goût de l'Amérique* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001), p. 27.

14 François Truffaut, 'Les critiques de cinéma sont misogynes: B.B. est victime d'une cabale', *Arts: Spectacles*, no. 597 (12–18 December 1956), p. 3.

15 For more information on Vertov's reception in France, see Georges Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov* (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1971), pp. 108–36.

16 Georges Sadoul, *Histoire d'un art: le cinéma* (Paris, Flammarion, 1949), p. 172. Sadoul later regretted the inaccuracies in this description. See his *Dziga Vertov*, pp. 108–10.

17 Jean Rouch, 'The cinema of the future?', in Steven Feld (ed.), *Ciné-Ethnography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 268.

18 Edgar Morin, 'Chronique d'un film', in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, *Chronique d'un été* (Paris: InterSpectacles, 1962), p. 41. A slightly abridged version of this book was included in *Ciné-Ethnography*. While I generally follow its fine translation of Morin's essay and the film transcript, at times I substitute my own, as is the case here.

19 Morin, 'Chronique d'un film', p. 8.

breathing. What is, is.¹³ Truffaut's review of *Et Dieu créa la femme/And God Created Woman* (1956) commends Roger Vadim's direction of his star (and then-wife) Brigitte Bardot in similar terms: 'I thank Vadim for directing his young wife by having her reenact everyday gestures before the camera. . . . Rather than imitate other films, Vadim wanted to forget cinema to "copy life".'¹⁴

This phrase – forget cinema to 'copy life' – could also describe Rouch's and Morin's original goal. On one level they wanted *Chronique d'un été* to allow unprecedented access to real-world events as they took place. Above all, their cinema verité was anchored in a Bazinian dream of transparency in which the process of cinema is forgotten in favour of the real. Although this term was chosen to pay tribute to Vertov's notion of *Kino-Pravda*, Vertov's name did not immediately possess the formalist connotations it carries now, since his writings and most of his films were widely unavailable in France until the mid 1960s.¹⁵ Initial assessments of his work by Soviet cinema expert Georges Sadoul and Rouch himself stress its innovative content: what distinguished the director from peers such as Kuleshov or Eisenstein was not his use of montage, but his strong attraction to contemporary life. Writing in 1949, Sadoul positioned *Kino-Pravda* as an outgrowth of France's realist tradition: 'Vertov took these words, which mean *Cinema Vérité*, as a slogan: like Lumière, he intended to banish from cinema all which was not "taken from life" [*pris sur le vif*].'¹⁶ Rouch frames him in a similar manner: he claims that, by bringing the camera into the street, Vertov heightened the cinema's capacity to show '[his] camera was an eye, a new eye open on the world, which allowed anything to be seen'.¹⁷

If cinema verité paid tribute to the Soviet director's interest in documenting reality, it was never imagined solely in these terms. In *Les Stars*, written several years before the collaboration with Rouch, Morin defines it as a genre of independent film which includes neorealist fictions such as Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948) and Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1934) as well as documentaries like Flaherty's *Nanook*. These examples hint at the tension the label contains: while it promises a closer connection to an unspecified, pluralized notion of truth, Morin also suggests that cinema verité remains connected to the aesthetic experience that film affords. This contradictory agenda reappears in discussions of *Chronique*. At times, Morin claimed that the film should 'eliminate fiction and bring us closer to life'.¹⁸ If he stated that 'this is not a fictional film', however, he also added 'this is not a documentary'.¹⁹ Indeed, many of *Chronique*'s events are actively provoked rather than passively documented. Rouch in particular worked to surprise or disorient the film's participants during shooting. While committed to the authenticity of the encounters before the camera, he also rooted the film in the desire to fabricate which lies at the heart of fiction. One of the best-known examples of this approach occurs during a discussion of racism and antisemitism on the restaurant terrace of the Musée de l'Homme, when he deliberately creates uncomfortable tension by questioning an

²⁰ For a discussion of this scene, see Rothberg, 'The work of testimony', pp. 1236–7.

²¹ Godard, 'Exclu l'an dernier du Festival', p. 195.

²² Roland Barthes, 'Cinéma droite et gauche' [1959], in Éric Marty (ed.), *Œuvres complètes Tome I: 1942–1965* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1995), p. 788.

oblivious Modeste Landry about the camp number tattooed on Marceline Loridan's arm.²⁰

The verite project is based on this conflict between spontaneity and mise-en-scene: its central issue is neither truth nor falsehood, it is the permeable border between art and life. In this sense, *Chronique's* search for a genuine depiction of French society and French youth parallels similar quests in the first features by ex-*Cahiers* critics like Chabrol and Truffaut. By popularizing the term cinema verite, Rouch and Morin gave focus and direction to the ill-defined New Wave rhetoric about truth. At the same time, their image of France surpasses those of its predecessors in two ways. *Chronique* makes it clear that, despite Godard's call for a cinema which could show 'things as they are', the early New Wave films were structured by a double gap.²¹

The first gap in early New Wave realism has to do with the separation of appearances from the ideological complexity of physical reality. Although they explicitly proposed to deal with contemporary issues, films like *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (Francois Truffaut, 1959) or *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) tended to envision the real world in terms of surfaces. Roland Barthes makes this point in his review of Claude Chabrol's *Le beau Serge* (1958). While he praises the director's accurate rendering of contemporary rural life, he condemns his inability to see appearances in context with larger forces: '[Chabrol is] always interested by the intermittence of human misfortunes, and never by how they connect'.²² What is deliberately bracketed in early work by Chabrol, Truffaut and Godard is not simply politics, but a clear notion of the social dimensions of representation.

This gap between surface and core is accompanied by a second separation: in the late 1950s, French cinema also testifies to a technologically determined split between film and world. Since cameras were too heavy and microphones too delicate, filmmakers did not have the equipment they needed to show 'things as they are'. Although they proposed to lead the cinema into the streets of Paris, the *Cahiers* directors were still working according to classical notions of film production. They understood filmmaking in terms of the reconstruction of a preexisting scenario rather than as a spontaneous response to developing events in the real world. This traditional approach demanded a great deal of foresight: films had to be planned out shot by shot, each sequence needed to be properly lit, sets needed to be prepared and locations scouted, movements blocked and interactions rehearsed. By the time shooting began, everyone on the set was supposed to know what was going to happen in front of the camera.

Chronique's challenge to this paradigm becomes apparent when we compare it with an example made in the previous year. Although *Breathless* championed an improvised aesthetic, its appearance of effortlessness was actually the product of a great deal of work. The camera used on the project, a 35mm Cameflex, was smaller than other models but still noisy, relatively heavy and easily visible: in order to

shoot Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg on the Champs Élysées, for example, Godard was obliged to hide his cinematographer Raoul Coutard inside a mail-delivery pushcart and physically drag him up and down the street.

Chronique d'un été marks the moment when this kind of baroque solution starts to become a thing of the past in France. This change is due to the equipment Rouch had developed especially for the project. Halfway through shooting he started using a prototype of the portable 16mm sync-sound camera that would become an industry standard, the KMT Coutant-Mathot Éclair. This new prototype was smaller, lighter, and more inconspicuous than Coutard's Cameflex. Its reduced size and weight allowed its operator to follow random movement with near-total freedom. Rouch enthusiastically framed the camera's development as a turning point in cinema history: 'We could film in the middle of the street, and no one knew we were shooting except the technicians and the actors. . . . We have at our disposal a fantastic tool in perpetual progress.'²³

This camera was not always present during the making of the film. Once Anatole Dauman agreed to fund *Chronique*, the project began as a standard production with Albert Viguière, a distinguished technician who had worked on *Le jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939), as director of photography. Almost immediately after joining the crew, Viguière not only quit the film but asked Dauman to remove his name from it in order to preserve his reputation. In his opinion, Rouch's improvised approach made it impossible to ensure the most important element of his role as cinematographer: the quality of the image.²⁴

Viguière's opposition underscores the fact that what Rouch was asking for went against conventional filmmaking practice. *Chronique's* aesthetic developed outside of French cinema: Rouch was strongly influenced by short features produced by Canada's Office National du Film/National Film Board, in which experiments with non-sync 16mm cameras had been underway since the mid 1950s. He had seen early ONF/NFB efforts at the Flaherty Seminar at UCLA in 1958 and was particularly struck by *Les Raquetteurs* (1958), a documentary about competitive snowshoeing by Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx. What fascinated Rouch about this short was that the cameraman, Brault, filmed certain sequences while walking. Instead of placing the camera on wheels and filming at a distance as Raoul Coutard did, he was able to hold the image steady on his own while remaining close to his subjects.

For Rouch, this unusually fluid camerawork constituted the technical advance that would push cinema towards the world. Brault was the only person Rouch and his colleagues knew who was able to film this way, and they were so impressed by his work that they flew him to Paris from Canada to finish the film. His introduction to the crew corresponds with the adoption of the new camera. In the wake of his arrival, *Chronique* can be divided into two general categories of scenes: the initial fixed-camera sequences Roger Morillère and Viguière shot with a tripod-mounted

²³ Rouch, 'The cinema of the future?', p. 272.

²⁴ *Chronique d'un été* émission 19: Albert Viguière (prod. Jean-Pierre Pagliano, dir. Claude Giovanetti), France Culture radio broadcast, 20 mins, tx 22 August 1991.

25 While a number of other cameramen (including Raoul Coutard) made minor contributions to the project, the majority of the film's footage was shot by Brault, Morillère or Viguier.

26 Morin, 'Chronicle of a film', in Feld (ed.), *Ciné-Ethnography*, p. 252.

27 Jean-Luc Godard, 'Entretien' [1962], in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* vol. I, p. 235.

28 André Bazin, 'The evolution of the language of cinema' [1958], in *What is Cinema?* vol. I, p. 37.

Arriflex camera, and the later mobile ones filmed by Brault with either the Coutant-Éclair or a silent hand-held Arriflex.²⁵

Rouch's and Morin's film also incorporates significant advances in sound technology. Up until 1960, it was difficult to capture live sound and image simultaneously outside controlled studio environments. Since exterior filming in synchronized sound was costly and required unwieldy equipment, it was easier to have the cast come back after shooting had finished and overdub an audio track during postproduction. *Chronique* marks the moment when this process starts to become unnecessary. In addition to his walking camera method, Brault also brought Electro-Voice lavalier microphones with him from Canada. While the interior scenes were recorded with a boom mike, these new models could be concealed under clothing and connected to a portable Nagra tape recorder for outside shooting. Once the scene was finished, it was fairly easy to match the Nagra reels with the images, and in this way it was possible to create an early version of sync sound.

These different types of sound equipment allow *Chronique* to make a radical gesture towards what Morin called 'an authentic talking cinema'.²⁶ The film introduced the complexities of spontaneous speech generated by regular people in ordinary environments to a commercial cinema that had been dominated by trained actors delivering mannered, literary dialogue in studios. It provided a crucial platform for the voices of workers, students, housewives and immigrants. Godard, for example, would later claim with categorical aplomb that 'the first time I heard a worker speak in a movie was in *Chronique d'un été*'.²⁷

By including footage shot before and after the arrival of the new microphones, camera and cameraman, Rouch's and Morin's film constitutes a precious document of French cinema in a state of change. Through its various innovations, it was able to span the *Cahiers* directors' double gap. In the first place, it implicitly responds to Barthes's ideological criticism of Chabrol by using its sharpened image of the world to create space for marginalized voices and incite dialogue about political issues. Secondly, Rouch's pioneering use of technology enabled French film to take one step closer to a Total Cinema which could integrally copy events in the real world as they happened. Since the new equipment radically opened film to improvisation, the recreation essential to both mainstream and New Wave features was no longer the only option.

Chronique's impression of reality surpassed that of the New Wave, but it is important to emphasize that all of these filmmakers were working within the same paradigm. Like the *Cahiers* directors, Rouch and Morin shared a Bazinian faith in the cinema's power to uncover fundamental truths: in showing appearances (things as they seem) they hoped to reveal essences (things as they are). They also shared Bazin's admiration for films that 'give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality'.²⁸ In *Chronique*'s final scene, Morin frames the film in precisely these terms: 'This film, as opposed to ordinary cinema, reintroduces us to life.

29 Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 'Chronicle of a Summer', in Feld (ed.), *Ciné-Ethnography*, p. 327.

People approach the film as they do in everyday life, that is, they aren't guided, because we have not guided the spectator.'²⁹

Although he positions *Chronique* as an 'unguided' film, the meaning of this word is not entirely clear. On the level of content, it is true that the work neither judges its protagonists nor promotes an obvious message about everyday life. On a formal level, however, I would argue that Rouch and Morin relentlessly guide their spectators. What Rouch's technological push towards Total Cinema masks is another kind of reconstruction, one which took place when he and Morin assembled the material they had collected. In this respect, the work's image of reality is just as constructed as that of any other film.

Chronique is a heavily edited feature which tries to mask directorial intervention. Rather than insist on the cuts from shot to shot, Rouch and Morin place editing in the service of phenomenological transparency. Their goals for the project become clearer when we examine a specific example. One of the key scenes in the film is a discussion between Morin, Jean-Pierre Sergent and Marceline Loridan in which the latter two express bitter disappointment with their lives. Although this conversation seems coherent, it is actually the product of calculated manipulation. What appears to be a single-take sequence is composed of two different scenes filmed months apart. The editing reverses chronology, putting the later of the two first.

The initial footage, in which we see Sergent working alone in an apartment, was filmed after Brault had joined the production. Almost immediately, his mobile-camera shot gives way to the actual discussion, a static, tripod-mounted Arriflex sequence that was among the earliest filmed for *Chronique*. If in many ways the atmosphere of authenticity in the film is founded on the synchronicity of sound and vision, the appearance of reality is achieved here by splitting the image and audio tracks. Morin's introductory question, 'Jean-Pierre, you are a student, you are twenty years old, and I wonder how you get by in life', was a part of the second sequence, but Rouch and Morin lay it over images from the first, using a sound bridge across the two shots to mask the cut.³⁰

In the process of editing, however, something is lost: Morin's detailed production diary, which he later published as 'Chronicle of a film', states that the images of Sergent at his desk originally had a completely different meaning. This footage was shot in order to document 'Jean-Pierre preparing for his philosophy exams, which he failed in June. An important theme: if Jean-Pierre fails them again in October, he will lose his deferment and be called up for military service, that is to say, Algeria.'³¹

The political subtext is absent not only here but in the discussion itself. In fact, the discussion suppresses an even more volatile connection to the Algerian War. In a 1991 interview, Sergent explained the context for his onscreen depression: before *Chronique* he had been a *porteur de valises* within the *réseau Jeanson*, the clandestine network of French operatives who were committed to aiding the FLN in its struggle for Algerian

30 Ibid., p. 303.

31 Morin, 'Chronicle of a film', p. 244.

32 *Chronique d'un été* émission 5: *Jean-Pierre Sergent* (prod. Jean-Pierre Pagliano, dir. Claude Giovanetti), France Culture radio broadcast, 21 mins, tx 2 August 1991.

independence.³² On 24 February 1960, just a few months before his conversation with Morin, the French police broke up this network and revealed its existence to the general public. Sergent was not among those arrested and, for obvious reasons, the film contains no mention of his connection to this group. At the same time, the feelings of anxiety and depression he expresses in this scene clearly testify to the aftereffects of this political commitment.

What is interesting, then, is that the Algerian War structures both parts of this sequence while remaining completely invisible. Although the film represses overt political commentary, it does not completely remove the political: the term exists here as a function of philosophical commitments rather than particular issues. In this sense, the Jean-Pierre segment is one of *Chronique's* most intensely political scenes, since it directly raises the question of individual engagement. Sergent begins by explaining how the previous generation's intellectual collapse has deterred him from future commitment. Loridan concurs: while she avoids the specifics of her situation, the camera reveals that the past has affected her even more seriously when it pans down to show the concentration camp number on her arm for the first time. By showing its participants struggling in the wake of major historical events like the Occupation, the Holocaust, and the postwar failures of the French Left, the film communicates a shared feeling of despair and simply asks how to continue.

This question is raised again in the following scene, a roundtable discussion of the Algerian War. *Chronique* might have been the first French film to discuss this topic openly, but its treatment of the war is relatively superficial: it takes no overt position and the possibility of Algerian independence is never mentioned. The debate over the war resembles Morin's conversation with Sergent and Loridan: both episodes manage to silence political issues while raising political questions. In each case, this contradictory engagement is a result of the editing.

While the roundtable discussion of the war is one of the film's most relentlessly edited sequences, this only becomes clear when it is compared with transcripts of the rushes.³³ These transcripts reveal the scene's anodyne nature to be completely artificial: the final product, in fact, is a Frankenstein-like recombination of stray images and random sentences cobbled together into an uneven whole. Some of the cuts were made to focus a discussion that rambled on for over an hour. Others, however, were made to unfocus it: as in the previous scene, Rouch and Morin removed references to specific issues. The exchange between Sergent and Viguié, who at this point was still the project's director of photography, provides a good example. In the film, Viguié attacks the younger generation:

There is an Algerian problem, and there is a student problem . . . the two problems have become mixed up, and that's huge because it is a problem that touches you, particularly you young people, and what I reproach you young people for in this problem is for not playing your

33 The transcripts are located in the archives of the Comité du Film Ethnographique in Paris. I thank Françoise Foucault for permission to quote from them here.

34 Rouch and Morin, *Chronique d'un été*, p. 99.

35 Rouch and Morin, *Chronique d'un été*, transcript of rushes of discussion of Algerian War, 8 typed pages (Reels 1–2), Comité du Film Ethnographique, Paris, p. 7.

36 Rothberg, 'The work of testimony', p. 1242.

37 Ivone Margulies, 'Chronicle of a Summer (1960) as *Autocritique* (1959): a transition in the French Left', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2004), p. 177.

part . . . me, in my opinion you aren't playing it, you aren't playing it in full.³⁴

The rushes indicate that this statement was a fragment of a much longer monologue. As the following passage shows, the lines spoken in the film (italicized below) only give part of the picture:

AV: I remember people in the Resistance . . . who were getting their heads kicked in, who were getting sent to Auschwitz I mean, there are problems, there were people who came forward with exceptional courage, but you, you . . . tell me something, right now you're in the process of working out a problem, you're arguing it in the most highly philosophical way possible but damn it, that's not what I'm asking you to do, *there is an Algerian problem, and there is a student problem . . . the two problems have become mixed up, and that's huge because it is a problem that touches you, particularly you young people, and what I reproach you young people for in this problem is for not playing your part . . . me, in my opinion you aren't playing it, you aren't playing it in full.* Because unfortunately, the young person's past requires contempt for death. . . . Well! You're not there yet . . .

X: What do you mean by playing your part in full?

AV: Following one's convictions to the bitter end.³⁵

What Viguier was really doing before the cameras, then, was pushing the assembled group to action. If Sergent attacked the political failures of Morin's generation in the previous scene, Viguier's comments reverse the dynamic and put the blame on youth. They also point to the dense web of issues underpinning debate about the war during this period. As Michael Rothberg has argued, *Chronique* was produced within 'a discursive context in which the association of torture, truth, testimony and resistance underwrote a link between the Algerian war and Nazi atrocities'.³⁶ This example demonstrates how the tightly knit relationship between colonialism and occupation was systematically unravelled in the final cut. Political content was reduced to a spectral presence: it became the ghost which haunted this film and its protagonists.

Initially, this reluctance to engage with political issues seems easy to explain: the most obvious reason for removing references to the Algerian War is fear of reprisal, be it censorship of the film or, in Sergent's case, arrest and interrogation. Rouch and Morin made their feature at a time when the French government was actively keeping all criticism of the Algerian war out of the movies. Rather than risk prohibition of the film's release, they voluntarily cut material they knew would cause them problems with censors. Consequently, as Ivone Margulies has argued, the film's politically engaged individuals are veiled in political anonymity.³⁷

And yet these cuts should not solely be attributed to a fear of censorship. The film's treatment of politics must also be seen as symptomatic of a work that is maddeningly riddled with gaps. The transcripts of the rushes confirm that the directors had filmed

conversations that situated their protagonists more clearly. They not only declined to include this material, they also avoided structuring mechanisms like intertitles or captions which would have clarified who was speaking, and when and where the conversations were taking place. As a result, the film swings erratically between anonymity and intimacy. We get hints of personality just as we get hints of politics, but we never fully understand who the people onscreen are and how they relate to one other. By presenting moments of intense personal confession lived in front of the camera by total strangers, the film suggests an embarrassing conflation of private and public.

Morin's critical work helps to explain this confusion. While Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* (1955) and *Moi, un noir* (1958) raise some of the same issues as *Chronique*, Morin's writing offers a much more explicit account of both his vision of cinema and his philosophical approach. Margulies has provided a strong reading of the film's connection to Morin's *Autocritique* and his political positions during the 1950s and 1960s, but his work from this period on films, mass communication and everyday life also offers vital clues as to what was at stake in his collaboration with Rouch. When taken together, this work suggests that *Chronique*'s vacillation between private and public can be at least partially understood as its directors' deliberate choice. Morin, in fact, had defined the everyday as vacillation a full two years before he started working on the film. In a lengthy review of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, he argued that 'everyday life is indeed at the intersection of microsociology and macrosociology. It is subject to the great determinations, the great taboos, the great myths of macrosociological life, but it is lived on the level of individuals and individual relationships'.³⁸

In making *Chronique*, Morin positioned it as a total portrait which tried to account for these various levels of being: 'The fundamental question that we wanted to pose was about the human condition in a given social setting and at a given moment in history'.³⁹ Accordingly, when assembling the film from the rushes, he fought to create '[a] collective halo around the characters'.⁴⁰ This emphasis on 'humanity' recalls the title of the book Morin published with Les Editions de Minuit in 1956, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*. In this idealistic text he endowed cinema with the power to touch mankind itself, claiming that it possessed a 'universal language' which could move all viewers in fundamentally similar ways.⁴¹

Both this book and its followup, *Les stars*, centre on the bond between spectator and film. These studies define viewing as a double act of projection onto and identification with the onscreen world. The terms 'projection' and 'identification', which Morin calls 'fundamental psychic processes', are linked through a circular relationship.⁴²

Everyone in life, either spontaneously or through the suggestion of cues or signs, transfers onto others feelings and ideas which he naively

³⁸ Edgar Morin, 'La vie quotidienne et sa critique', *La NEF*, no. 17 (May 1958), p. 82.

³⁹ Morin, 'Chronicle of a film', p. 263.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁴¹ Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma, ou l'homme imaginaire: essai d'anthropologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1958), p. 217.

⁴² Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959), p. 244.

43 Edgar Morin, *Les stars* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), p. 144.

44 Morin's ideas about film are in dialogue with the broadly framed US investigations into mass communication and mass culture which were developing at around the same time. He made these connections explicit in the first book he published after *Chronique's* release, *L'esprit du temps I: Névrose* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962), which draws on the work of sociologists like Paul Lazarsfeld and David Riesman.

45 Barry Dornfeld, 'Chronicle of a Summer and the editing of cinéma-vérité', *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 2, nos 3–4 (1989), p. 319.

46 *Chronique's* absorptive self-reflexivity should be compared with the distancing self-reflexive techniques (the use of coloured filters, the disjunctions between sound and image, the foregrounding of formal techniques) employed by Godard in films like *Le mépris/Contempt* (1963).

47 Morin, 'Chronicle of a film', p. 263.

attributes to them. These processes of projection are closely associated with processes which identify ourselves more or less strongly, more or less spontaneously, with others. These phenomena of projection and identification are encouraged by artistic spectacles. . . . We experience spectacles in a quasi-mystic way by mentally integrating ourselves into the characters and the action (projection) and by mentally integrating characters and action into ourselves (identification).⁴³

In essence, Morin argued that film and viewer shape each other in predictable ways. *Chronique* offered him a chance to apply these theoretical beliefs to practical situations.⁴⁴ He intended it as an effort at communication, an exchange not only between the people on screen, but between the film and its audience. While focusing on the singular, the project was ultimately intended as a starting point for phenomenological communion in which spectators are led to a universal truth about contemporary life.

Morin's notion of film as phenomenological tool sheds light on the inconsistencies of the film's editing: its tendency to remove some, but not all, references to personal or political specifics suggests a desire to stage subjectivity as an open category which could embrace and transcend individual existence. This is why, to take just one example, its protagonists have first, but not last, names: the particular is partially included to avoid reducing the film's participants to caricatures of social types, but an excess of personal detail is left out to keep them from being too singular.

If the film's presentation of its protagonists was tailored to encourage audience identification, the same could be said of its structure as a whole. Visual anthropologist Barry Dornfeld emphasizes that *Chronique* was shaped to fit cinematic norms: '[it] did not intend to call attention to the form (on the level of shot-to-shot construction) of this new cinéma-vérité. . . . The film was intended to be agreeable to an audience, to avoid radical departure from the conventions of documentary film form in the structuring of images that were radically recorded.'⁴⁵ Establishing a conventional structure draws attention away from the form of the scenes and towards their content. By encouraging viewers to focus on the words and feelings of the protagonists, Rouch and Morin facilitate the transmission of the film's emotional message.

In this respect, what *Chronique* seeks is neither fact nor fiction, but presence. Even the majority of its self-reflexive gestures – the directors discussing their work before the camera, for example – should not be read as distancing mechanisms.⁴⁶ Instead, the film exhibits an anti-Brechtian self-reflexivity: by acknowledging the artificial context for onscreen interactions, the filmmakers attempt to reinforce the honesty of their efforts and the sincerity of what was being filmed. As Morin stated: 'I thought that we would start from a basis of truth and that an even greater truth would develop'.⁴⁷ By displaying sincerity, the directors hoped to create an immanent onscreen world which would be recognizable to viewers.

48 Quoted in Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov*, p. 111.

49 Jean Rouch, 'À propos des films ethnographiques', *Positif*, vol. 2, nos 14–15 (1955), p. 145.

50 Edgar Morin, *Le vif du sujet* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), p. 277.

51 Morin, 'Chronique d'un film', p. 25.

Rouch, in fact, had been moving towards immanence since he began making films: 'my goal', he told *Les lettres françaises* in 1957, '[is] not to reconstitute life, but to show it'.⁴⁸ In an early article on ethnographic film, he praises works in which 'the screen stops being a screen which separates people from one another' and 'a mysterious contact is established . . . as if there were no more cameras, no more recording devices . . . none of that mass of accessories and technicians which make up the great ritual of classical cinema'.⁴⁹ The same idea appears in Morin's work: the latter begins a short piece on mass communication, for example, by declaring that 'in a good piece of information, the medium is erased . . . in order to show the event and let it speak'.⁵⁰ These quotations suggest that moments of real contact transcend the circumstances of their creation. At these times language, filmic or otherwise, gives way to feeling.

Morin's 'Chronicle of a film' reveals a strong faith in this principle. His belief in universals seems to have led him to assume that the feelings the film transmitted were unmistakable, that its audience would all understand them in the same way: his own. He and Rouch intended to end the film with decisive proof of cinema's capacity for direct communication. The final scene was supposed to record the protagonists' reactions to a screening of unedited rushes at the Studio Publicis. Morin envisioned a Rousseau-esque happy ending:

I had dreamed of a sort of confrontation in a room after projecting the film, with multiple cameras and multiple microphones recording not only the reactions to the film, but also the conversations that would start up spontaneously and according to affinities between the different characters; a big final scene where the scales would fall from our eyes and conscience would be awakened, where we would take a new Tennis Court Oath [*un nouveau Serment du Jeu de Paume*] in order to build a new life.⁵¹

The proposal he sketches out here is for a utopian panopticon that would not only capture a total image of 'true' communication but inspire the creation of a new social contract. The political implications of his language should not be lost. The Serment du Jeu de Paume, a turning point in the French Revolution, united the Third Estate and set it against the Monarchy. This oath constitutes a moment in which marginalized groups pledged to change the political process that had excluded them. In alluding to it, Morin underscores the extent to which he imagined *Chronique* as a revolutionary enterprise.

Revolution, in fact, is the key component of the film's phenomenological approach. As we have seen, Morin understood the act of viewing film as a process of recognition. Since his conception of spectatorship is linked with collective belonging, this recognition is implicitly social, and thus carries a definite political weight. It is no surprise, then, to find that his 1959 memoir *Autocritique* frames an early trip to the movies as a decisive moment in his leftist trajectory: 'what I

52 Morin, *Autocritique*, pp. 20–21.

53 Morin, 'Chronique d'un film', p. 14.

54 Edgar Morin, 'Que faire?', *Arguments*, no. 16 (1959), pp. 1, 2.

55 Margulies, 'Chronicle of a Summer (1960) as *Autocritique* (1959)', p. 174.

56 Rouch and Morin, *Chronique d'un été*, p. 126.

felt, perhaps for the first time, was the possibility, the idea, the hope of salvation through collective redemption, collective salvation, the liberating horizon of so many expectations and anxieties'.⁵² The same desire for shared catharsis haunts his descriptions of *Chronique*, which he intended as 'a montage of images in which the question "How do you live?" is transformed into a "How can one live?" and a "What can one do?" [*Que faire?*], which has repercussions on the spectator'.⁵³

This statement tells us much about the place of political action within the film. The phenomenological truth to which it hoped to lead its viewers was not a practical one. While the directors coded their work with political sentiment, they did not make a militant film which pushed spectators to a predetermined course of action. This lack of explicit direction is also evident in Morin's writing. The last question he asks in the passage above – '*Que faire?*' – is also the title of an article about political engagement which he published in *Arguments* just a few months before starting the film. In this wilfully indecisive text, Morin emphasizes: 'I believe in the *great systems*, in the great theoretical and practical construction which encompasses the problems of nature and man' and asserts that 'we must contribute towards the elaboration of a new system'. However, he also concludes that 'our role, today, is to announce that there is no Good News'.⁵⁴ Since he knows of nothing that could supplant the French Communist Party's discredited Marxism, he has no idea what the new system he calls for should look like.

The same deep-seated uncertainty is clearly at work in his film. Margulies reads this reluctance to provide answers as broadly symptomatic of 'a problematic moment in the [French] Left's intellectual engagement'.⁵⁵ The late 1950s, she argues, was a period in which intellectuals such as Morin were searching for an independent theoretical platform outside the aegis of the Communist Party. In this sense, *Chronique*'s indecision mirrors that of its times. Instead of leading its viewers to answers, it attempts to level the hierarchical differences between filmmakers, protagonists and audience so that all could search together. In simply presenting evidence about the Algerian War, the situation of the working class and the increasingly structured nature of everyday life, Rouch and Morin gambled that individuals would feel their way to a cathartic awareness of unity and the possibility for change.

Unfortunately, this hope was profoundly misplaced. In fact, Morin's dreams of catharsis were invalidated even before *Chronique*'s production had wrapped. This brings us back to the Studio Publicis and the film's screening scene. Rather than provide a triumphant conclusion, the discussion which followed the projection of the rushes quickly degenerated into a series of arguments: Angelo Borgien's 'natural' conversation with Modeste Landry, for example, was alternately read as a moment of 'human contact' or as 'excessively fake', and many participants strongly criticized the film as both false and 'immensely tiresome'.⁵⁶

57 Morin, 'Chronicle of a film', p. 328.

Morin's diary informs us that this scene was absent from the initial print of the film; it was added only once he and Rouch decided that the original ending (their more timid evaluation of the project made weeks before the Publicis discussion) was not strong enough. When they decided to include it, they also shot a new 'final' scene, a postscript in which they struggled to come to grips with their participants' unexpected reactions. Morin concludes the film by expressing his disappointment at the general lack of comprehension: 'I thought that everyone would be moved by this film, and to see now that people that I like very much . . . are criticized, well, that upsets me, that bothers me. I believed the viewer would like the characters that I liked.'⁵⁷

This comment points to the central conflict in *Chronique d'un été*. Ultimately, the film's tremendous phenomenological push towards universally recognizable knowledge is openly invalidated by its conclusion. By moving one step closer to a Bazinian Total Cinema, the film managed to cast suspicion on the phenomenological process, on cinema's potential accurately to reflect the world and 'naturally' communicate the larger truth it contains. As a result, what come to the fore are the problems inherent in the notion of collective consciousness.

The Publicis scene is perhaps the most dangerous moment in the film, since it calls everything that has gone before it into question. If *Chronique*'s earlier self-reflexive moments were placed in the service of sincerity, the discussion of the film by its participants embodies a more problematic self-reflexivity. In criticizing their onscreen behaviour, the protagonists establish distance within a work founded on proximity. When they label their intimate revelations exhibitionist, the shadow of a doubt is cast on the nature of the events depicted: how is it possible to know if those on screen are lying or telling the truth? And which truth are they telling? What was intended as a direct presentation of lives, feelings and political sentiment in fact provokes the suspicion that everything has been staged for the spectator's benefit. Given the uncomfortable awareness of theatricality produced by this scene, the final discussion between Rouch and Morin must be read as an effort at salvaging a commonly held truth. In acknowledging differences in interpretation, they also make a last-ditch attempt at an authoritative reading of their subjects' behaviour.

The negative reactions of *Chronique*'s participants were particularly damaging for Morin since they challenged the principles of projection and identification at the heart of his theoretical work. The texts he published in the 1960s do not abandon these concepts, but they do go further in acknowledging the possibility of individual interpretations.⁵⁸ As his ideas changed, his assessment of the film became more critical. In 1963, he clearly confessed his disappointment with the experience: 'Comment vis-tu, misnamed *Chronique d'un été*, was, under the name *ciné-vérité*, an unsuccessful draft of a cine-dialogue, of a cine-communication, that revealed the difficulties and the facilities, the traps and the diversions, of such an undertaking to me'.⁵⁹ While after

58 See, for example, the discussion of cultural consumption on pp. 59–62 of *L'esprit du temps*.

59 Morin, *Le vif du sujet*, p. 279.

⁶⁰ In *Le vif du sujet*, Morin also briefly mentions another film project undertaken in Chile during the early 1960s: the apparently unfinished *Alameda*. See p. 279.

⁶¹ Many in the film went on to careers in cinema: following *Chronique*, Loridan and Sergent made a film about Algerian independence (*Algérie année zéro* [1962]) and Régis Debray went to Venezuela to collaborate with Pierre Kassoitz on his documentary *Les chemins de la fortune* (1965). Loridan later collaborated with (and married) Joris Ivens, becoming an important voice in militant filmmaking. She and Sergent worked together most recently on her 2003 *La petite prairie aux bouleaux*. Marilù Parolini worked as still photographer, actress, screenwriter (for Jacques Rivette and Bernardo Bertolucci) and director (of *Aussi loin que mon enfance* [1971], which she made with Jean Eustache). Modeste Landry and Nadine Ballot also collaborated with Rouch on other projects, and Ballot has a brief cameo in Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* / *Shoot the piano player* (1960).

⁶² Eric Rohmer, 'La "somme" d'André Bazin' [1959], in Jean Narboni (ed.), *Le goût de la beauté* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1984), p. 149.

Chronique Rouch made a series of mid-length features (*La Punition* [1962], *Rose et Landry* [1963], *Gare du Nord* [1965]) using its equipment and some of its cast and crew, Morin gradually distanced himself from filmmaking. Interestingly, however, he was involved with at least one more film during the 1960s. The question of truth, and the lesson he learned from his collaboration with Rouch, were decisive influences on this second project, a 1964 Franco-Israeli coproduction tellingly entitled *L'heure de la vérité*.⁶⁰

Set on the eve of the Eichmann trials, this little-seen film, which never had commercial release in France, was scripted by Morin and directed by Henri Calef. It deals with an American sociologist's unmasking of a Nazi war criminal, the supervisor of a Sonderkommando unit, who in the last days of the war masquerades as one of his victims, takes refuge in Israel, marries and starts a family there under the dead man's name. The film opens with a shot that directly recalls Rouch's and Morin's feature. In order for the Nazi officer Hans Wernert to change his identity, he must have a camp tattoo. The credits unfurl against a closeup of the newly inscribed number, which immediately evokes the one from Birkenau on Marceline Loridan's arm. *L'heure de la vérité* returns to one of *Chronique*'s most powerful, self-evident truths and recasts it not only as a lie, but as a screen which covers up past atrocities. Rather than attempt to speak the truth, Morin's cautious script approaches the issue as an imbricated series of problems: the film ends on a deeply ambiguous note in which the fate of the now-captured officer is left completely open to question.

L'heure de la vérité's very existence hints at the subterranean reach of Rouch's and Morin's film over the course of the 1960s. *Chronique d'un été*'s sharpened reproduction of contemporary Paris proved to be both a window and a brick wall. On the one hand, it inaugurated a current of documentary-style European filmmaking, directly influencing works such as Chris Marker's and Pierre Lhomme's *Le joli mai* (1963), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore* / *Love Meetings* (1964), and Godard's *Masculin-Féminin* (1966).⁶¹ These films attempted to extend *Chronique*'s investigation into the everyday lives of so-called ordinary people; they all work from a shared Bazinian faith in cinema's power to show the real.

Although *Chronique* harks back to Bazin, however, its inability to confirm a consensual real underscores the necessary artificiality of filmic realism and contradicts what Eric Rohmer described as the main tenet behind all of Bazin's criticism: his belief in the cinema's inherent objectivity, in its innate capacity to represent the world as it exists.⁶² In this sense, Rouch's and Morin's feature indirectly announces the turn away from the ideal of cinema as transparency which takes place in French film and French film criticism over the course of the 1960s. By 1968, the enthusiasm for representational illusion had given way to the awareness of the cinematic image as a construct that can support, mirror or resist dominant ideologies. In the wake of the May riots, many critics

and filmmakers wholeheartedly accepted the position that cinema's role was no longer to reflect reality but to intervene in it. As the key theoretical questions shifted terrain from aesthetics to ethics (and, on another level, from phenomenology to structuralism), the revolution Morin hoped for was embraced, but on different terms. French cinema's move towards political action largely occurred at the expense of conventional representation.

By casting a shadow on realism and raising questions about the forces that shape everyday life, *Chronique d'un été* set off a slow-burning reconsideration of cinema's relationship to the world. If the emergence of the New Wave was intimately connected with Bazin and auteur theory, major changes in the theory and practice of French cinema in the 1960s – the move away from phenomenology, the dissemination of new cameras and microphones, the expansion of militant filmmaking collectives, the reawakened interest in theories of montage, the rediscovery of the Soviet avant gardes of the 1920s – can all be traced to the early debates about cinema verite. Rouch's and Morin's film stands as a crucial document of a moment in which, to use Michael Fried's terms, the Bazinian era of absorption starts to give way to a new emphasis on a theatricality of process: in its wake, the truth of the real was no longer a simple matter of sound and vision.

Sincere thanks to Françoise Foucault, André Heinrich, Jean-Pierre Pagliano, Michel Brault, Ivone Margulies, Margaret Flinn, Kate Crehan, Michael Rothberg, Steven Ungar, Lawrence Kritzman, Marie Bonnel and The Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center for their help and support. Research for this essay was made possible through a PSC-CUNY Research Award.

Addressing the dialectics of sexual difference in Eisenstein's *Que viva México!*

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This essay proposes a new reading of the differences between the aesthetics of the early and the late Sergei Eisenstein (the so-called 'epistemological shift') through the prism of his unfinished film *Que viva México!* (1930–31), its various conceptions and Eisenstein's contemporary and later writings, both personal and theoretical, about the film. By looking in particular at the question of bisexuality and gender in light of Eisenstein's experience in Mexico, it reexamines his understanding of dialectics as the structuring principle of his theoretical and artistic oeuvre. The essay explores links between the representation of women and 'the primitive' in the first episode of the film, 'Sanduga'. Following the path that has been established in particular by Anne Nesbet in her critical biography of Eisenstein and in Mikhail Iampolskii's essays on Eisenstein's theories, I link his representation of women to the concept of 'the prelogical' which he developed primarily during his stay in Mexico. In a dialectical twist, women in the film provide the link between radical politics and the return to a pre-Symbolic unity. This discussion engages with feminist film theory and Teresa De Lauretis's critique of semiotics, and links transgressive sexuality in the film to Eisenstein's later writing on the protoplasm and the bi-sex as an originary state of nature and human consciousness, prior to sexual differentiation. It draws on materials previously neither translated into English nor discussed at length by other scholars.¹ In conclusion, the discussion returns to the question of gender and compares the images of the Day of the Dead in *Que viva México!* to a painting by Frida Kahlo depicting the

¹ The transliteration system used in the body of the essay aims for the best readability. I therefore follow the common forms of non-English names in the text (Eisenstein rather than Eizenshtein) but preserve the original transliteration in the notes. The archival sources all originate from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, here abbreviated as RGALI. The following abbreviations are used: *KZ* for *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*; *Metod* I for S.M. Eizenshtein, *Metod*, Volume I, ed. Naum Kleiman (Moskva: Muzei kino, 2002); *Metod* II for S.M. Eizenshtein, *Metod*, Volume II, ed. Naum Kleiman (Moskva: Muzei kino, 2002).

2 The story of the making of the film is documented in Harry M. Geduld and Ronald Gottesman (eds), *The Making and Unmaking of 'Que viva México!'* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970).

same subject, and finally addresses the traumatic impact that the loss of the footage of *Que viva México!* had on the Soviet director.

In December 1930, after a failed attempt to work in Hollywood, Sergei Eisenstein and his crew (Eduard Tisse and Grigorii Alexandrov) travelled to Mexico to make a film. The project was to be funded by the American socialist writer Upton Sinclair and his wife, with an agreement that Eisenstein would make a picture that was both artistic and commercial. Sinclair's brother-in-law, Kimborough, went along with the Soviet crew as manager, keeping Sinclair informed about the project's development. After over a year of shooting on location, producing over 200,000 feet of film stock – a running time of some forty hours – Sinclair withdrew funds. He nonetheless promised to send all the Mexican footage to the Soviet Union – to which, under direct pressure from Stalin, Eisenstein promptly had to return. Ultimately, however, the footage was kept in the USA, where some of it was used in various Hollywood productions and some for reconstructions (*Thunder Over Mexico* [Sol Lesser, 1933], *Death Day* [Sol Lesser, 1934], *Time in the Sun* [Marie Seton, 1939], *Mexican Symphony* [Bell and Howell, 1940]). The majority of the footage was ultimately archived in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the 1970s, it was finally returned to the Soviet Union where, on the basis of a portion of the footage, Alexandrov reconstructed yet another version of the film in 1979.² The film is now to be reconstructed by director and film historian Lutz Becker and the Mexican Picture Partnership, using all the available footage; the project is starting this year.

Eisenstein never lived to see any of his footage, and never edited a single sequence from it. This was one of Eisenstein's many projects that were never fully realized. Yet, as a result of his remarkable imaginative drive, combined with his obsessive self-analysis, even those of Eisenstein's films which were never shot at all acquire a certain eerie stature in film scholarship because they bear the unmistakable mark of the director. Unlike his 'virtual' films such as *An American Tragedy* (1929–30) or *The Glass House* (1926–30) – projects which never came to be realized but exist as hundreds of pages of notes – and unlike *Bezhin Meadow*, which was filmed in 1931–35 but then destroyed and now exists only as a collection of stills, *Que viva México!* has a real materiality to it. If in some ways it is less than a film (lacking any sound or editing), in other ways it is more, in the sheer volume of footage, in the coexistence of multiple scripts and notes on the film, and in the many (often conflicting) comments made by Eisenstein in his later essays and lectures on what the film was intended to be.

It is perhaps by virtue of the state of the film and Eisenstein's attitude towards it that its importance has largely been neglected by film scholars. *Que viva México!* is a site of collision between, on the one hand, the Marxist dialectics of early 'constructivist' Eisenstein and, on the other, his later organic mythological conceptions. As such it sheds light on a central concern of Eisenstein scholarship, the shift between early and late Eisenstein, and further clarifies the differences between his work of

various periods. An additional reason for the importance of *Que viva México!* is that the film reflects with particular clarity conflicts which emerge in the modernizing agendas of both the Soviet Union and Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, both countries having recently experienced revolutions in which the modernizing drive came into conflict with the presence of traditional culture in vast nonurban areas. As I shall show, the difficulty in dealing with and conceptualizing this encounter is best embodied in the film's treatment of women and indigenous people. In these representations both groups figuratively stand in for the 'pre-modern'.

The question of how to read this film in its unfinished, fragmented and yet expansive form is intimately tied to the shift in Eisenstein's theoretical work.³ Indeed, regarding the state of the film as linked to Eisenstein's shift will help us understand not only how to read the differences between early and late Eisenstein but also the ways in which the excess evident in *Que viva México!* can serve as a governing metaphor in Eisenstein's cinematic theory and practice.

What most Eisenstein scholars have been compelled to confront when addressing Eisenstein's theoretical legacy is the question of its development, and specifically how to relate the 'early' (1920s) to the later (post-1932) Eisenstein. The first to address this issue was David Bordwell, in two essays published in *Screen* in the mid 1970s.⁴ Bordwell later developed and significantly refined his position in what is probably still the most fundamental piece of scholarship on Eisenstein's theory and practice, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*. In this book, Bordwell characterizes Eisenstein's early writing and his 'mature poetics' as presenting 'dramatic shifts of interest and emphasis',⁵ arguing that the later theories are centred on synthesis and organic unity while the early theoretical work is more fundamentally Constructivist and Formalist. What is most immediately at stake in this question is the need to understand the striking changes in Eisenstein's filmmaking style between the 1920s and the late 1930s. In particular, many devotees of the Soviet avant garde of the 1920s – most notably the French, English and US film theorists of the 1960s, who were also in part responsible for uncovering Eisenstein's theoretical legacy – not only regarded his works of the later period as dangerously close to Socialist Realism, but also believed that his theoretical works of that period betrayed his earlier radical revolutionary models by abandoning dialectics and adopting the discourse of holistic organicity.⁶

While all scholars agree that there is, indeed, a noticeable shift in Eisenstein's writing, interpretations of that shift are strikingly different in the work of most scholars who have directly addressed this question (most notably Bordwell, François Albera, Annette Michelson and Oksana Bulgakova).⁷ This spectrum of positions is to a great extent due to the fact that all find support in Eisenstein's writings. The most noticeable departure from the notion of a 'shift' can be found in the writings of Mikhail Iampolskii, who views Eisenstein's early poetics as a

3 David Bordwell was the first scholar to use the term 'epistemological shift' in relation to this development in Eisenstein's theoretical writing. See note 4.

4 David Bordwell, 'Eisenstein's epistemological shift', *Screen*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1974/75), pp. 29–46, and 'Eisenstein's epistemology: a response', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1975), pp. 142–3.

5 David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 195.

6 Annette Michelson's programmatic 1966 essay 'Film and the radical aspiration'. See Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration', in P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000).

7 In addition to the already cited works by Bordwell, see François Albera, 'Eisenstein and the theory of the photogram', in Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (eds), *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, (London: Routledge, 1993), and *Eisenstein et le constructivisme russe: dramaturgie de la forme* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1990); Oksana Bulgakova, 'The evolving Eisenstein', in Al LaValley and Barry P. Scherr (eds), *Eisenstein at 100: a Reconsideration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), and *Sergei Eisenstein: a Biography* (San Francisco, CA and Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2001); Annette Michelson, 'Reading Eisenstein reading *Capital*', *October*, no. 2 (1976), pp. 27–38, and 'Reading Eisenstein reading *Ulysses: montage and the claims of subjectivity*', *Art & Text*, no. 34 (1989), pp. 64–78.

⁸ See in particular, Mikhail lampolskii, 'Eizenshteinivskii sintez', in *Uskol'zaiushchii kontekst: russkaia filosiia v postsovetskikh usloviakh* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2002), pp. 77–105, "'Organicheskai mashina" u Eizenshteina i Disneia', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* no. 34 (1997) and 'Sublimatsiya kak formoobrazovanie', *KZ*, no. 43 (1999).

preparatory stage for the final synthesis.⁸ The approach I adopt here is much indebted to lampolskii's analysis, while at the same time it aims to take into account the historically and culturally specific context of the Soviet Union's and Mexico's struggles with and towards modernization in the 1920s and 1930s.

It is clear throughout Eisenstein's theoretical writings that there is a preoccupation with the status of the relationship between two independent entities, usually standing in opposition to each other, be it on the level of two elements within one shot, in two shots, and so on: a system of difference, in other words. For Eisenstein, this relationship is reformulated in different ways within various frameworks, and while in the earlier works discontinuity and fragmentation are emphasized (using terms such as conflicts, jumps and contrasts), his later vocabulary tends towards what might be termed a more 'holistic' approach, insisting on correspondences and unity. The key terms, however reformulated, remain the same: montage and dialectics, both of which imply the centrality of relational composition. In these terms, what paradoxically appears to be at stake for the later Eisenstein is using montage and dialectics (with their structure of difference) to get to a state that is, in fact, nondifferentiated.

If Eisenstein's intellectual quest can be presented as a movement towards a synthesis of two opposites, it can also be read as a synthesis of the early 'constructivist Eisenstein' (to borrow Albera's and Bordwell's term) and the later 'organic Eisenstein'. In his later work we witness a synthesis of psychology and physiology through the experience of *pathos* and *ex-stasis*, which provides the necessary shift towards a unified, nondifferentiated state. If the governing metaphor for dialectical montage in the early Eisenstein is collision (or explosion), in later Eisenstein this is replaced by growth and 'coming out of one-another'. Not only does a reading of Eisenstein's texts risk being subordinated to the director's own expressed theorization of them, but Eisenstein's filmmaking itself has been famously critiqued by André Bazin for its overdetermination of the image to the exclusion of any ambiguity or ambivalence, where image acts merely in the service of a predetermined meaning.

In his writing, Eisenstein too sought to synthesize everything and fit all phenomena into a neat economy of meaning by drawing upon wildly disparate fields of knowledge in an attempt to produce a formula that governs them all. And yet his own writing characteristically resists any such economy, producing constant detours and narrative excesses which become more and more pronounced throughout his work. These features, in turn, can be seen as analogous to the baroque quality of his visual images. Having acknowledged this, one has to read both 'with' Eisenstein and 'against' him, trying to determine the formula and its application, while at the same time trying to read all that which resists this economy of meaning – the excess (which is not unrelated to what Raymond Bellour calls 'the textual unconscious').⁹ In this kind of reading, *Que viva México!* as a whole is an example of just that: a body of

⁹ Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

film that in the process of its creation would not be subordinated into any fixed system, its raw filmic material constantly overflowing and breaking out of any predetermined structure. Similarly, on the personal level, Eisenstein's stay in Mexico was marked by an unmatched burst of creative activity, as is evident from his drawings and his sexual experimentation.

Theory and autobiography in Eisenstein are constantly intertwined. From the late 1920s, Eisenstein continuously worked on books about himself and his art: in 1929 he conceived of writing a collection to be called *My Art in Life*, and throughout the rest of his career he combined theoretical investigation with autobiographical exploration, as is apparent in, for example, his notes towards *Metod*, as well as in his letters and writings. By constantly drawing examples from his personal (and, in particular, his intimate) life, Eisenstein sought to project his theoretical 'method' onto his own body and his psyche, making an explicit link between his writings and his life, between thought and action. This tendency was especially strong in his last years, when he intertwined the writing of his final collection of theoretical essays with personal memoirs. During his stay in Mexico, Eisenstein illustrated the material for the film and his theoretical investigations with notoriously pornographic drawings. This suggests a possibility of reading the visual and textual excess in Eisenstein as evidence of a cultural and historical (and perhaps even a personal) anxiety over the body, which in turn may be seen as a desperate attempt to mediate between the continuity of history and the shock of modernity. Trying to find internal correspondences between all phenomena, 'the structure of things',¹⁰ Eisenstein in his work strives to get at the 'dynamic totality',¹¹ (absent from either individual or collective experience) which he locates in the body, finding correspondences between its biological evolutionary development and the structure of art and of the Unconscious. Given the overlap between theory and autobiography, this anxiety about the body becomes anxiety about history itself, the autobiographical readable as an attempt to write history through subjective experience and to restore historical continuity through the continuity of the body.

There is, however, a certain confusion in Eisenstein's writing about whether this nondifferentiated state lies outside time and history, or whether it is merely a return to the prehistoric (in both biological/psychoanalytical and anthropological terms) as linked to his writing on the pre-regress and the return to the womb. The development in the 1930s of Eisenstein's concept of 'sensuous' (or prelogical) thought is rooted in anthropology, but is consistently linked in his writing to the return to an originary biological state, to the mother's womb (to which he always refers, borrowing from Otto Rank, as 'Mlb' [sic], *MutterleibsVersenkung*). This evolution of the human body is presented in Eisenstein's writings as parallel to the evolution of all living organisms, the starting point of which is the protoplasm. As he conceives it, analogous to this evolutionary trajectory is sociopolitical history with

¹⁰ *Metod* I, p. 17 and elsewhere.

¹¹ *Metod* II, p. 399 and elsewhere.

12 'Ways of regress' was the title of a chapter intended for *Metod*, written between 1934 and 1943.

13 Iampolskii addresses this tendency in Eisenstein in 'Sublimatsiya kak formoobrazovanie'.

14 Kristin Thompson uses *Ivan the Terrible* as an illustration of the concept of cinematic excess in chapter 9 of her book, *Eisenstein's 'Ivan the Terrible': a Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

15 Joan Neuberger, *Ivan the Terrible* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), p. 95.

16 Yuri Tsivian, *Ivan the Terrible* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), p. 71.

its original undifferentiated class system. This, however, is not yet the nondifferentiated dynamic unity – the Hegelian synthesis – that Eisenstein is striving to arrive at. His 'way of regress'¹² is a mere return which requires no dialectics; or perhaps is only a starting point for the process of becoming, but one which requires its dialectical opposite to complete the qualitative leap. In the process of synthesis, which occupied Eisenstein throughout his career, the structure of difference is replaced by a dissolving of all differences into a utopian unified whole, a totality that is merely an attempt to restore the original state and is not achieved by means of transformation: this is a false totality in the dialectical sense, and is certainly a false dialectic.

By subsuming the dialectic and the very structure of difference into a romanticized whole, Eisenstein tends to the opposite of his quest: instead of 'going out of one's self' in ex-stasis, he in fact ends up by solipsistically projecting himself onto the rest of the world, eradicating 'the other'.¹³ The stronger this tendency in his writing, the more excessive and baroque his images become. This is most clearly manifested in *Ivan Groznyi/Ivan the Terrible* (1958), as Kristin Thompson's analysis (though done from a very different methodological position) shows.¹⁴ In his later work, Eisenstein's apparent repression of the structure of difference by means of presenting art as a unified totality results in a proliferation of excess. By repressing the notion of sexual difference, for example, in favour of the 'bi-sex' (which Eisenstein identifies with the earlier prelogical forms of being), he in fact creates not a radical totality but rather a utopian community of feminized men, quite simply excluding women from the picture. While women in Eisenstein's films figure as links to the premodern originary state (after all, you need a womb to come back to), the transformed state of unity simply replaces them with men. In *Bronenosets Potemkin/Battleship Potemkin* (1925), this takes the form of the revolutionary unity of sailors on board the *Potemkin*. In *Ivan* this tendency is even stronger, and the overflow of visual excess there is accompanied by a process of replacement and eventual eradication of the presence of women. Thus for example, as both Yuri Tsivian and Joan Neuberger demonstrate, in Part Two of the film Fedor Basmanov visually and structurally occupies the place of Ivan's deceased wife, Anastasia, becoming 'Ersatz Anastasia'.¹⁵ This replacement reaches its culmination in the famous colour sequence, a scene that mirrors that of Ivan's wedding and which Yuri Tsivian calls an 'all-male revel'.¹⁶ Unlike *Ivan*, however, *Que viva México!* is still at an intermediary stage, where Eisenstein is attempting to sustain the dialectic, to prevent its being completely subsumed by the organic principle, suggesting that the return to the premodern is still mediated by its opposite, the ultramodern revolutionary impulse.

Eisenstein proved to be perhaps the only Russian in Mexico who managed to produce something more than a pure projection of that country. *Que viva México!* is more than just another European's vision of the exotic land. Rather, it provides textual evidence of an intense

dialogue between the Soviet filmmaker and some of the main figures of the Mexican art scene. The film is rich in intertextuality on the visual level, often referring to the works of the Mexican muralists and Tina Modotti, among others, and engaging in the ideological polemics of 1920s and 1930s Mexico. The film can only be accurately read within the larger context of the Mexican Renaissance and of postrevolutionary Mexican ideology.

The seeds of this comparison between modern art in Mexico and the Soviet Union are planted in Laura Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's essay on Frida Kahlo's and Tina Modotti's 1983 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London:

It is worth comparing the art-historical fate of the Mexican renaissance with that of Russian art of the 1920s. There are similarities between the two experiences. In both countries the example of cubism enabled artists independently to develop a specific culture of modern art. In both countries the overthrow of *ancien regime* (tsarism, the *porfiriato*) and the recasting of the society after political revolution and civil war gave the avant-garde a particular vision of its role, to produce the new art for the new society. . . .

Recent years have seen a great revival of interest in the Russian avant-garde and particularly in the ways in which art and politics converged and clashed. Many of the same issues and problems arose in Mexico at the same time – the relationship of the avant-garde artist with the mass audience, the role of collective work, the relationship between art and craft, the absorption of cubism into a complex national culture, the relationship between propagandist content and innovative formal concerns, and so on.¹⁷

To this list of similarities I would add something also made explicit in Mulvey's and Wollen's essay: the marginal position of the two countries at the time, both geographically and culturally, and the consequent anxiety regarding their perceived necessity to reaffirm the national *vis-à-vis* Europe and the USA. Mulvey and Wollen also emphasize the significance of 'uneven development' in Mexico and Russia, which in both countries allowed for a convergence of art and politics in the postrevolutionary moment.

In Mexican and Soviet avant-garde art of the period there is an immediate connection between primitivism and a renewed sense of nationalism. Just as the search for national origins led Mexican artists in the direction of Aztec culture and of contemporary indigenous arts and crafts, the Russians looked towards the 'Orient', as well as to peasant art forms, as the mythical foundation for national expression. This turn to the Orient has as complex and dialectical a relationship to contemporary western culture as does the Mexican turn to Aztec and Spanish colonial art. Artists were drawn to these sources to a large extent as a gesture of resistance to and rejection of western (primarily European) cultural hegemony. At the same time, the national identity fashioned from these

17 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 82.

indigenous traditions was always filtered through the very western traditions that these artists were ostensibly resisting. This can be seen, on a formal level, in the obvious legacy of Cubism (and, for the Mexicans, of the Italian Renaissance). Among the avant gardists, there was a consistent tension between, on the one hand, archaism – a conscious return to the past, to the premodern, traditional, especially folk art – and, on the other, futurism, embodied in particular in the promise of technology. In both Mexico and the Soviet Union, these ‘archaic’ and ultramodern elements, often directly connected to the promise of new technology, were central for the arts in the decades following their respective revolutions.

This historical dialectic has been mirrored in art and culture, as modernism in its various manifestations has oscillated between these two poles: between the premodern and the ultramodern, between the organic and the constructed, between nature and technology, between continuity and rupture. It is also often the representation of women (and of gender in general) that has served as a perfect indicator, and testing ground for, this complex relationship. Women are most often associated with the natural and premodern, with nature and agriculture, and because of their role in the domestic sphere and as mothers they are often also linked to tradition and continuity in society: witness the many allegories about ‘mother earth’, the nation, and so on. Simultaneously, woman (and gender), once divorced from this organic discourse, very often functions as subversive, providing a rupture, or at least a challenge, to social harmony and the symbolic economy.

Eisenstein’s treatment of the construction of national identity through the indigenous heritage in Mexico and his representation of women reflect this challenge: to construct a vision of historicity through art that would successfully mediate between past and present, between traditional and modern, in a way that would not fall into the trap of either historical evolutionism (which undermines the complexity of the relationship between modernity and tradition by insisting on the inevitable victory of modernization) or a mythological construction of history which privileges the ‘natural’ and obliterates any possibility of social change. His confrontation with these issues in Mexico allowed for their exploration in his film, which is rare for Soviet art of the period, making *Que viva México!* a particularly interesting test case for an exploration of these issues. The most striking example of the treatment of the gender issue is the first episode (or ‘novella’ as Eisenstein refers to the parts of the film in his various librettos), entitled ‘Sanduga’.

‘Sanduga’ continues the theme of a Pre-Columbian utopian past as a foundation of Mexican culture. Like the film’s ‘Prologue’, it maintains the tension between being situated in an unspecified past and in the present day. Eisenstein’s treatment of the origins of the Mexican nation ideologically fits in with the cultural programme of the muralists and other figures of the Mexican Renaissance, who constructed Mexican national identity through the continuity of Mexican culture from

18 Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920–1925* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 143.

19 Olivier Debourse, *Figuras en el Trópico: Plástica Mexicana 1920–1940* (Barcelona: Océano, 1985), pp. 39–40.

pre-Columbian days, representing the indigenous past as a kind of utopic origin of the nation. The key ideologues of this utopian space were Jose Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education in the 1920s, and his assistant Adolfo Best Maugard. When Vasconcelos recalled Diego Rivera from France to participate in the project of nation-building through arts and education, the first muralist project he assigned in 1922 was for the walls of the Bolivar Amphitheatre in the National Preparatory School (*el Anfiteatro Bolivar de la Escuela Preparatoria*). After six months, Vasconcelos was still unhappy with the results of his commission, proclaiming Rivera's style 'too Europeanized'. After Rivera demonstrated some interest in Best Maugard's lecture on traditional Mexican art, Vasconcelos, apparently upon Best Maugard's advice, financed Rivera's trip to the south of Mexico to 'put him back in touch with his roots' and instil in him a sense of national pride. There are ecstatic accounts of Rivera's experiences in his memoirs, as well as in Jean Charlot's canonical text on the Mexican muralist movement.¹⁸

Upon his return from Tehuantepec, Rivera changed his style considerably, incorporating a Rousseau-esque vision of a Mexican paradise as part of the mural *Creation*.¹⁹ Rivera's depiction of Tehuana women in his famous murals at the Secretariat of Public Education (*La SEP*) in Mexico City were admired by Vladimir Mayakovsky during the poet's visit to Mexico in 1925. The same images from this mural were photographed by Modotti for Rivera, who brought them to Moscow in 1927 and showed them to Eisenstein. Later that year, Modotti made her own series of photographs of Tehuanas, which became especially well known in the USA. The ornate costumes and jewellery of the Tehuana women in those photos are recognizable in the self-portraits and photographs of Frida Kahlo. By the early 1930s Tehuantepec, as depicted in murals, paintings, and photographs by famous Mexico-based artists, had been exported as the authentic indigenous foundation of the country (figure 1). In the cultural mythology of Mexico, actively created by Vasconcelos and Best Maugard and later by the muralists, Tehuantepec came to be the mythic site of the country's origins – a tropical paradise populated by ornately decorated, powerful, indigenous women. The images of this mythological Indian, existing as if independently from the economy and culture of contemporary Mexico, are characteristic of the iconography of postrevolutionary Mexico and strikingly similar to European romantic or modernist primitivisms.

If the social organization of Tehuantepec is presented as organic and natural, so is the fact of the matriarchy, thus reversing patriarchal social norms and the 'natural' position of women within patriarchy. This seems also to reverse the system of representation, in which woman is a passive object to be looked at: women get to choose their partners, not the other way around. In a characteristic reversal, what seems the most conservative, essentialist position in the reconstruction of the premodern as the natural leads to the conclusion that what is natural is, in fact, not patriarchy but matriarchy. There is, however, another reason why it is

especially significant for Eisenstein that Tehuantepec, the birthplace of the Mexican revolution and the image of Edenic paradise, is ruled by women. In Eisenstein's writings paradise repeatedly coincides with a concept that becomes increasingly important – that of the return to the mother's womb. These persistent images of birth and womb, which he employed in the film and in artistic discourse, are no mere metaphors for Eisenstein. Rather, he understood them as linguistic atavisms of real phenomena, the coincidence of individual biological development and collective social and political development. For Eisenstein, history is



Fig. 1



Fig. 2
Tehuana women. *Que viva México!* Picture courtesy Mexican Picture Partnership.

²⁰ See, for example, Anne Nesbet's account of Eisenstein's fascination with fetuses in *Savage* *Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), pp. 140–43.

²¹ *Metod II*, p. 397.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 541.

always at once biological, social and personal. The dark and moist tropical area of Tehuantepec is not only a stand-in for the womb (of civilization, of the revolution, and so on), but actually coincides with it and is analogous to the real womb of a woman. Eisenstein's further development of these ideas finds its most explicit manifestation in notes made in the last two years of his life, grouped under the title 'Mlb' (1947–1948) – the image of mother's womb (*obraza materinskogo lona*). In these notes he explores the image of the return to the womb as the prototype of all artistic creation, where the form of the circle or sphere always designates evolutionary regression to the originary undifferentiated state prior to birth. Although his interest in the evolutionary development of life forms, both individual and collective, had started much earlier,²⁰ his explicit linking of primitive art and the theme of the return to the womb came from a book that he 'stole' from Robert Flaherty in Hollywood,²¹ Miguel Covarrubias's *Island of Bali*. Most of his later notes on 'Mlb' use examples from this book, as well as Covarrubias's own drawings and caricatures, leading him to the conclusion that 'Mlb. [is] everywhere in art!'²² The role that Covarrubias's book plays in his notes suggests that the development of Eisenstein's ideas of the return to the womb also lead back to his Mexican period. The imagery of 'Sanduga' may this be retrospectively read through Eisenstein's writing from the 1940s.

In the notes dated 16 October 1948 on Engels's writings on the family ('*k Engelsu o semje*'), Eisenstein constructs a system of analogies linking matriarchy to the return to the womb, to the sea/ocean, to the image of paradise, to 'early undifferentiated consciousness, to the unconscious, and to preclass society'. He starts with the idea that sublimation finds its manifestation in modes of production. Following Engels, the first and the most primitive mode of production he designates as reproduction, making the woman the original mode of production:

The process of sublimation – as ontogenesis – is phylogenies – in each individual case: the evolutionary ladder and its repetition in the embryo – replicates this process in the history of socially conscious human being, which takes the place of the previous one at a certain stage of development. This is very important!²³

After his analysis of womb imagery in the Bible and Greek myths, he returns to Engels and the associations of artistic forms that are closer to the womb (the originary undifferentiated state of being), with matriarchy as the earliest stage of development of society: 'The polarity of the two types of culture within the prehistoric era of "maternal law" and "paternal law" is reflected in art just as figurative plastic art prevails in the cultures of "maternal law"'.²⁴ Eisenstein then associates patriarchy with the emergence of a class system, which leads him to equate matriarchy and preclass society, which he links in turn to the unconscious: 'very important: the subconscious, the unconscious – a copy of preclass, the rule of matriarchy'.²⁵ A little further on he

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

26 Ibid., p.564.

27 S.M. Eisenstein, *Memuary*, Volume II, ed. Naum Kleiman (Moskva: 'Trud' Muzei kino, 1997), pp. 487–8.

28 In distinguishing between 'woman' and 'women', I follow Teresa De Lauretis's formulation in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5–6.

29 *Metad II*, p. 562.

30 On the influence of Eisenstein's theories on the development of Soviet semiotics, see Viacheslav Ivanov, *Ocherki po istorii semiotiki v SSSR* (Moskva: Nauka, 1976).

continues: 'so the sensuous-complex prelogical consciousness, the production of vessels – are attributes of the matriarchy'.²⁶ Here, finally, is a fusion of all the separate elements – thematic as well as stylistic, explicit as well as implied – of 'Sanduga': the matriarchy as the natural state, the image of paradise, the preclass society with childbirth as the predominant mode of production, and all associated with the sensuous and the primitive, all preconditions of the synthesis that can allow for a definitive shift from the preclass to the postclass society (figure 2).

Eisenstein also uses womb imagery to describe Diego Rivera's art and persona in notes for an essay 'The Prometheus of Mexican painting', written during his stay in Mexico.²⁷ Given that much of the imagery of 'Sanduga' was directly influenced by Rivera's murals, this association between Rivera and womb imagery in 'Sanduga' becomes even more explicit. However, Eisenstein insists on this being merely one pole, only one element, of the future synthesis of his own art; the other being the more 'phallic', 'masculine' art of Orozco. This is the dialectical model informing Eisenstein's theory: the synthesis of Rivera embodying the Tehuanas and the matriarchy, and Orozco embodying the phallus and the patriarchy. It is tempting to comment on Eisenstein's use of two men as embodying opposite qualities, yin and yang, feminine and masculine. Once again, there are no actual women here, only woman as a symbol and an abstraction – embodied by a man.²⁸ Moreover, woman in this scenario is equated with the womb, and, ultimately, with the tomb, emphasizing the circularity of life and death in primitive cultures. This motif reappears in the notes in relation to matriarchy: 'religion in it is above all – cult of the dead. NB: Womb-returning.'²⁹

This functional equation of woman with the womb and the tomb was fundamental to the early structuralist and semiotic theories of Yuri Lotman.³⁰ It is worth looking at Teresa De Lauretis's feminist critique of Lotman's work since, as I shall show, Lotman's ideas repeat Eisenstein's formulations almost word for word, and therefore bear direct relevance to the representation of women in 'Sanduga'. Lotman reiterates the equation of women with womb and tomb in his essay on plot typology, originally published in 1973 and translated into English in 1979 as 'The origin of plot in the light of topology'. In it, Lotman reduces the origins of plot structures to a central mechanism, which is coextensive with culture itself: this mechanism is cyclical-temporal, that is to say, mythological in its nature. Such a worldview presents human life in terms of a recurrent, self-repeating cycle, not enclosed between birth and death, but capable of starting at any point. Opposed to it is the linear narrative of historical texts which, according to Lotman, have a later origin. He then finds two basic narrative functions in all texts: 'entry into a closed space, and emergence from it'. He adds: 'Inasmuch as the closed space can be interpreted as "a cave", "the grave", "a house", "woman" (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness), entry into it is interpreted on various levels as "death", "conception", "return home" and so on; moreover all these acts are

31 Yuri Lotman, 'The origins of plot in the light of topology', *Poetics Today*, vol. 1, nos 1–2 (1979), p. 168, quoted in De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 118.

32 Ibid., p. 119.

33 See Ivanov, *Ocherki po Istorii Semiotiki v SSSR*.

34 Letter from Kimborough to Sinclair, 15 February 1931, Tehuantepec. Quoted in Geduld and Gottesman (eds), *The Making and Unmaking of 'Que viva México!'*, p. 53.

thought of as mutually identical'.³¹ Here again, the mechanism of 'analogies' is in place: this time of womb, woman, and narrative function.

Teresa De Lauretis observes:

In this mythical–textual mechanics, then, the hero must be male, regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and, indeed, simply the womb. The implication here is not inconsequential. For if the work of the mythical structuration is to establish distinctions, the primary distinction on which all others depend is not, say, life and death, but rather sexual difference. In other words, the picture of the world produced in mythical thought since the very beginning of culture would rest, first and foremost, on what we call biology.³²

This critique is equally applicable to Eisenstein's theories (on which Lotman's are indirectly based):³³ the very structuring principle assigned by Eisenstein to the workings of all human culture is based on biological sexual difference (the image of the womb). At the same time, the position of 'the feminine' remains purely structural: she/it is merely a position, a narrative obstacle, 'a womb', 'the tomb', 'woman'. The hero is always male – as the examples of Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco prove – and thus the only subjectivity is masculine. In Eisenstein's struggle to reach an undifferentiated original state, which is preclass and a paradise, he arrives at a totally male subjectivity, where female is the location at which a male hero – Eisenstein himself – strives to arrive. The female protagonists of 'Sanduga', who supposedly rule the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, are in fact mere abstractions, figures and narrative functions rather than characters. It is not surprising, then, that there is no mention of any real female historical characters anywhere in Eisenstein's film or in his writings on Mexico: they barely existed for him, surpassed by the power of the figures and abstractions for which 'woman' is a stand-in in Eisenstein's theories. It is less surprising to read in Kimborough's account of shooting the film in Tehuantepec that on 'the first day [the crew was] threatened by a group of men who said our cameras were machines that enabled us to look through women's clothes'. This is strange in a supposed matriarchy in which, according to the footage of 'Sanduga', women spend at least part of the time bare-breasted, and the rest enjoy freedoms usually allotted to men in patriarchal societies.³⁴ Eisenstein does not mention this event anywhere in his writing: it clearly went unnoticed by him and did not seem to alter in any way his representation of Tehuantepec as matriarchal and ruled by women. Once again, the real women who were not allowed by men to pose in front of the camera were hardly the point: on the screen they were to be transformed into figures of fertility, of a preclass society, of the womb and the tomb.

Eisenstein's most concise explanation of the function of preclass societies (and, by extension, of matriarchy) is in his 1932 notes for an

article about his Mexican drawings which was to be written by Anita Brenner for the journal *Creative Art*. In this draft, where he talks about himself in the third person, he links 'dialectical experience', which can take place in its earliest manifestation through forms of religious and (bi-)sexual transgression and ecstasy, with social and political transformation:

Dialectical epiphany remains on the stage of subjective experience up until the point of sufficient social differentiation, which would allow for the visible development of the phenomenon on the social organism (which corresponds to the sharp separation of the proletariat as a class.)³⁵

³⁵ *Metod II*, p. 494.

In other words, when social development has not reached the necessary stage coinciding with the rise of the working class, the only forms of dialectical experience available are subjective ones, primarily religious or sexual ecstasy. Only when society reaches the necessary stage of development can a collective form of dialectical experience – through art and, more specifically, through film – be possible. And yet, in a dialectical reversal, this progress can only be achieved by means of regression – both individual and collective – to the earliest forms. It is only when this regression is complete that the synthesis and the dialectical shift can take place.

As already observed, this 'drive to transform and to be transformed', to 'become', is of central importance in Eisenstein's thought of that time. It is developed into a theory of protoplasm as nondifferentiated primary matter characterized by infinite plasticity and capacity to transform itself. The term 'protoplasm' becomes central in Eisenstein's notes in 1932, the year of his return from Mexico:

In addition to this year's discoveries: the protoplasm. [It's a] social moment in biology: the emergence of the social from two ... cells: that's already a conflict of interests! ...

We have everything. It's time to create the system as a whole. And we must.

By all means.

Mexico?!!!

I challenge myself!

The challenge is accepted.³⁶

³⁶ See *KZ*, nos 36–37 (1997–98), pp. 24–5.

In these notes Eisenstein not only dates his 'discovery' of protoplasm as an operative category in his method, but also explicitly links it to Mexico and to themes of religious ecstasy and homosexuality: 'methodologically the best example of the shifting of art towards ex-stasis (religiosity, homosexuality, and Grotesk komisches)'.³⁷

³⁷ Fragment of Eisenstein's notebook dated 31 December 1932. See *ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁸ Anne Nesbet, 'Ivan the Terrible and "The juncture of beginning and end"', in LaValley and Scherr (eds), *Eisenstein at 100*, p. 293.

Anne Nesbet affirms that the concept of 'bi-sex' first appears in Eisenstein's notes between 1932 and 1934 in reference to clowns in the circus and ritual transvestism.³⁸ However, the term had already appeared in the notes for Brenner's article written in 1931 and used in direct

39 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 293.

relation to *Que viva México!* Eisenstein attributed transvestism and bisexuality to archaic prelogical states retained in the modern world: 'The exchange of clothing . . . is the exchange of essences – the crudest form of the materialization of these essences is the different sexual organs. Such that the exchange of clothing is the exchange of organs . . . the exchange of essences.'³⁹

In his 1944 essay '*Svdig na biologicheskii uroven*' ('The biological shift'), Eisenstein cites Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which he read in Mexico, as one of the sources of this idea. After a long list of examples of such exchanges, Eisenstein offers his own interpretation:

I think that this ritual belongs to the many beliefs that have to do with the study of the unified originary androgynous being, which was then divided into two types of essences – Male and Female, which then through marriage form a new restoration of this originary unified bisexual being. Through the situational reproduction of this originary nature, each becomes part of the superhuman being when at the moment of the ritual it becomes identical to the originary idol, which in all cultures shares both male and female essences.⁴⁰

40 *Metod* 1, p. 285.

Transvestism as well as bisexuality, then, are understood by Eisenstein as forms of a return to the originary primary state. While in this passage he designates this state as bisexual, the ultimate manifestation of it, on the level of both evolutionary biological matter and individual consciousness, is not so much bisexual as sexually nondifferentiated – that is, presexual. The androgyny of the gods to which Eisenstein refers in this passage is then linked to the potential breakthrough to a radically new state, characterized by lack of differentiation as to class or gender.

These ideas about bisexuality here bear no relation to any narrow sexual problem. We are interested in the issue of the 'lifting' of this biological field of application of the conceptual opposites through the image of an imaginary superhuman who unites the oppositions. Always and everywhere the possession of these qualities of the originary idol is linked to the ability to reach the superhuman state.⁴¹

41 Quoted in Ivanov, *Ocherki po Istorii Semiotiki v SSSR*, pp. 113–14.

Here for Eisenstein the prehistoric ideal gives hope for a utopian future; dialectically, the originary prehuman state of being manifests itself as superhuman, and both are pre- or postgender. For him, essences are indeed interchangeable and point to some original inseparability of the two genders. Thus identity, both gender and sexual, is just a matter of disguise, of clothing – and all of this is changing and interchangeable and acts as a manifestation of what Eisenstein, in 1933, calls 'plasmatic characteristics of primordial matter'.⁴² He links matter directly to libido, commenting that the theme of regression in Hegel 'could also refer to Freud: the libido theory . . . is the reproduction of the protoplasmic stage'.⁴³ Libido, then, is the direct reflection of the essence in which life and death, male and female, are inseparable. This protoplasmic stage is

42 RGALI, F1923 op. 2 d 231 1.17.

43 Quoted in Nesbet, 'Ivan the Terrible and "The juncture of beginning and end"', p. 297.

then coded in terms of human biological and psychological evolution, and thus linked to infantilism:

Why am I so personally engulfed in this Protoplasm-problem?
Because Protoplasm is infantilism. [It's a] project of the
protoplasmatic state into consciousness. Or if you prefer – its cyclical
return along the stages of development. This, of course, is the flow of
subconscious – this is infantilism – and there you have my case.⁴⁴

44 *Metod I*, p. 23.

Eisenstein here constantly uses the metaphors of biological time in reference to history. He linked the perceived androgyny of Mexican men and the 'playfulness' of Mexican women to the youth of their culture – by which he meant the pre-Hispanic, indigenous, Mexico – using metaphors of biological time in relation to history. These younger (that is, ancient) cultures are in this view closer to prelogical, sensual thinking.

Eisenstein assigns this quality to all of Mexico (and specifically to the *indio*), writing that Mexico is young and infantile, that its men and women are more androgynous because they are closer to the prenatal undifferentiated state of nature, and thus more protoplasmatic.⁴⁵ At the same time, he applies this same progression (or regression) to the biological evolution of humans as well as to the development of the individual consciousness. According to Eisenstein, bisexuality is a remnant of the predifferentiated state: its traces can be found in premodern cultural rituals, in prenatal development, and in the individual consciousness. Once again, a return to a predifferentiated state mediated through its dialectical opposite – analytical, logical, progressive thought – is what allows for a radical breakthrough: firstly on the level of individual consciousness and artistic creation, and secondly in the collective and social sphere.

45 RGALI, F1923-2-1046.

In his notes for Anita Brenner's article, Eisenstein designates bisexuality (or a 'bisexual conflict', or 'bi-sex') as the best example of the dialectical experience on the subjective level, before the possibility of the experience becoming social and collective: 'Bisexual conflict, *le plus saillant* in a subject, becomes the main factor for observation and the main mechanism for the realization of a [dialectical] phenomenon'.⁴⁶

46 *Metod II*, p. 495.

47 This letter was first published in *KZ*, nos 36–37 (1997–98), and the only other Eisenstein scholars to comment on its existence are Mikhail Lampolski in an essay 'Eizenshteinovskii "sintez"', published in a collection *Usko/zaiuschii kontekst: russkaia filosofia v XX veke*, and Oksana Bulgakova in passing in the chapter on Mexico in her biography of Eisenstein.

48 For a more detailed exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of these concepts as used by Eisenstein, see Lampolskii, 'Eizenshteinovskii "sintez"'.⁴⁸

What we know of Eisenstein's own sexual experiences in Mexico, to which he alludes in this passage as 'the object of observation' on one's subjective personal level, comes from a letter to his wife, Pera Atasheva.⁴⁷ It is worth quoting at length from the letter, in part because it provides the necessary background to the drama of Eisenstein's own life and the much-contended question of his sexual identity; but more importantly because it offers a brilliant example of how he theorized his own life within the same framework he applies to his art and his theories of art. Eisenstein's understanding of the connection between the philosophical concepts of 'will' and 'experience',⁴⁸ as explained in his notes to Brenner, provides a key to an understanding of this otherwise cryptic letter, and consequently to the whole cluster of sexual and homoerotic allusions in Eisenstein's work and writing.

Eisenstein met the man he describes in the letter at a party in Mexico City. They later had several rendezvous during the months of Eisenstein's stay on the hacienda Talpayac, exchanging a number of letters during 1931. From the man's letters it becomes evident that he was engaged to be married and seemed to have no direct connection with the artistic or political elites of Mexico. While it is difficult to reconstruct the full story, what is of importance is not what actually happened so much as how Eisenstein theorized his experiences. He fitted them into the same schema as that set out in the notes to Brenner: his subjective erotic experience is described as the first level of a 'dialectical perception' (*dialekticheskoi percepcii*) and the point of connection between subjective perception and dialectical materialism. Eisenstein analyzes his experience – and a neurosis associated with it, an inability to consummate sexual acts – in terms of the dialectic between prelogical thinking, in this case associated with what he calls 'expressive movement', and the logic of the libidinal body: 'Arms and legs (*and something else!*) don't lie and are not dependent on logic and its erroneous conclusions!' Here Eisenstein extends the logic of sensuous thinking, referred to also in Franz Cushing's and Lucien Levy-Bruhl's terms as 'manual concepts', to the idea of the embodiment of the ever-present memory of the primitive consciousness, of the body itself as the main conduit of these ideas, mediated through the analysis of the 'rational' mind.⁴⁹ While he analyzes his own sexual neurosis as 'sickness of the will', this concept of the will itself acts as a link between the subjective erotic-ecstatic experience and dialectical phenomena in general: 'The problem of expressive movement, as you remember, includes will as constituting the conflict. We should become clearer on this [issue] (pathologically in so many ways – what great field for vivisection – auto-vivisection!).'⁵⁰

And so once again Eisenstein comes full circle, from his sexual experience to universal will and back to his 'auto-vivisections'. He uses the same set of metaphors – not merely organic, as Eisenstein scholars have noted, but pathological, linguistically erasing the distinction between life and death, an important motif in the Mexican film. In his analysis of the 'organic machinery' in Disney and Eisenstein, Iampolskii remarks that Eisenstein seems to be unaware of the violence in the plasticity of Disney's characters, which he celebrated and linked to the primordial protoplasmic state.⁵¹ I would argue, however, that this violence and brutality on the body as it is subjected to infinite mutations, mutilations, and dissections – the graphic sadism of Disney's elasticity and Eisenstein's protoplasm – is integral to Eisenstein's thinking. Far from being blind to it, he is as acutely aware and as aesthetically invested in it as Georges Bataille. Iampolskii links this plasticity directly to the process of commodification. He implies that Eisenstein lacks awareness of both the commodification (turning living phenomena into objects defined by their exchange value) and the mortification implied in these synthetic experiments of unifying animals and people, machines and

⁴⁹ Eisenstein read Lucien Levy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* (originally published in English in 1922) in Paris before his trip to the USA. To no small degree, his interest in Mexico's pre-Columbian past arose from these readings. Franz Cushing was a US anthropologist whose article 'Manual concepts', quoted by Levy-Bruhl, prompted Eisenstein's engagement with both. See *Metod I*, pp. 235–6, and *Metod II*, p. 620.

⁵⁰ *KZ*, nos 36–37, pp. 236.

⁵¹ Iampolskii, "Organicheskaya mashina" u Eizenshteyna i Disneia'.

organic matter. For Iampolskii, this further signals Eisenstein's lack of awareness of the ideological dangers of commodification in art, and leads to his misrecognition and subsequent misinterpretation of Disney's elasticity as organic and natural.

As elsewhere in his writing, in his letter to Pera Atasheva Eisenstein finds an equivalence between a personal (psychological and physiological) dynamic and the same dialectic as it manifests itself in art and ultimately results in social transformation. Commenting on the synthesis of analysis and experience that resulted in his ability to consummate the sexual act, Eisenstein rather enigmatically brings Mexican plastic arts into the equation:

For the first time, I am experiencing and not evaluating. . . . Here it seems as if things came together for the first time. Besides we have here the case of aesthetic unload (discharge) – which is of course thoroughly sexual. And my adoration of the Mexican stone plastic arts is merely a static sexualism of a dynamic plasticity turned immobile.

The Mexican plastic arts are presented here as another manifestation of the same 'dynamic plasticity', sexuality (and, implicitly, bisexuality, as the highest manifestation of this primal plasticity), which a few months later he would term 'protoplasm', turned immobile. On the level of artistic creation, film technology is what brings motion back to these works – through the film that Eisenstein was in the process of making.

The Mexican picture in its conception is perhaps the fullest and most flexible realization, in order to thoroughly embody this internal cluster fertilized by the highest stage of the ecstatically-dialectical insight – from irony to crude buff, to the wit of a formula or an example of the most abstract statement.⁵²

52 *Metod II*, p. 494

If prelogical (or sensuous or primitive) thinking informs all of Eisenstein's theoretical investigations and artistic work in the period of the making of *Que viva México!*, it is often difficult to tell whether what he advocates is a mere return to older forms of perception – the ways of regress, as he terms them in his notes to *Metod* – or whether the method that he tries to formulate is, in fact, something quite different. How does one read Eisenstein's 'regress' and his insistence on the importance of prelogical thought as anything but politically and artistically regressive? How can one place this concept, which became so central for Eisenstein, in relation to his insistence on the dialectical nature of his theoretical framework?

As a result of this difficulty, Eisenstein scholars have either ignored this later development of his thought, or insisted on a complete switch, as Bulgakova did in her recent critical biography, which suggests a shift from the 'dialectical' Eisenstein to the 'organic' Eisenstein. However, at the end of his life Eisenstein explained this relationship, discussing it in terms of the way the prelogical relates to dialectics, and referring specifically to his experiences in Mexico:

It has long been noted that prelogic in the nature of its expression is almost literally identical to dialectical formulations. There is, however, a big difference between a similarity in essence and a similarity of the external expression. This similarity is in that this first 'period' [of consciousness] is included in the third, while having been 'treated' by the second – the logical (or, to be exact, the formally-logistical) period. The difference lies in the role of the second period, which breaks into the concepts of the first one. Thus it becomes possible to discuss the comical also as a system of prelogical ideas in the conditions of postlogical concepts.

Therefore, we have an exact formulation for the historical tomorrow in relation to the definition of the comical as a-logical (our today).⁵³

He then presents the phenomenon of laughing at death as an example of such a structure that can be found in Mexico:

It is precisely in Mexico – the country of unmatched youth, the country where birth and the process of becoming are the main feature of everything Mexican – that laughter at death is represented widely and monumentally.⁵⁴

For Eisenstein, then, Mexico and Mexican culture – its plastic arts, the muralist movement, the pre-Hispanic culture, its popular arts, its baroque heritage, all encapsulated in the celebrations of the Day of the Dead – became synonymous with his understanding of 'true dialectical method'. This method presents for him a model for a (utopian) total synthesis, and overcoming, of all differences. With an idiosyncratic form of blindness, Eisenstein presents a resolution of differences and conflicts which constitute major stumbling blocks for both the new Mexican state and society and his own postrevolutionary Russia. In a dialectical leap achieved in the 'Epilogue' to *Que viva México!*, he claims to have resolved the conflicts between 'the old and the new', between primarily agricultural areas and the state agenda for industrialization, and between an identity politics rooted in traditional lifestyles (religious, ethnic) and the ideology of the modern state. In a similar leap, arguably, he transcended gender differences, rendering them unimportant, through the radical synthesis of a revolutionary breakthrough. As often occurs in such utopian scenarios, this unity proved to be coded primarily as male, with an erasure of sexual difference resulting in the erasure of women. Thus in the 'Epilogue', women are either presented traditionally (as, for example, the dancing woman in front of the Ferris Wheel) or are absent.

A perfect counterpoint to these images from the 'Epilogue' is a painting by Frida Kahlo made seven years after *Que viva México!*, one of her minor and lesser known works entitled *Girl with Death Mask* (1938) (figure 3). In it we see an isolated image of a little Mexican girl wearing a mask exactly like the ones from *The Day of The Dead* (figure 4), with a

53 *Metod I*, p. 426.

54 *Ibid.*

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Oxford University Press apologizes for
any inconvenience.

Fig. 3
Frida Kahlo, Girl with a Death
Mask (1938). Private collection.
Picture courtesy INBA Mexico.

similar mask on the ground next to her. She is surrounded by a harsh, deserted landscape, and the combination of the infantile tenderness of her little body, the delicacy of her frilly dress – which is either festive, or perhaps just a nightgown – and the helplessness and uncertainty of her clasping a flower with both hands, are in sharp and uncanny contrast to the solid lifelessness of the mask she is wearing. The sky in the background is very similar to the sky in the execution sequence of Eisenstein's 'Fiesta'. The painting achieves the same remarkable crossing and blurring of the various boundaries as Eisenstein's images – between life and death, between human and nonhuman. The death mask, central to the painting, serves a variety of functions similar to those in Eisenstein's film. It is a reference to baroque allegory whereby all, young and old, rich and poor (the girl in the painting, like Kahlo herself, is

Fig. 4
Boys with death masks. *Que viva México!* Picture courtesy Mexican Picture Partnership.



coded through her dress as middle class) are equal in the face of death. The painting ironically reverses conventions: the skull is also a sign of non-western cultural otherness, functioning similarly – and possibly referring – to the African masks in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907).

Unlike Picasso's painting, where the masks serve as markers of a radically different culture, of strangeness and otherness, here the mask is rendered as a cultural commonplace in Kahlo's own environment, through the reference to the tradition of the Day of the Dead in Mexico.⁵⁵ This painting is also ultimately very autobiographical, as all Kahlo's paintings tend to be. Just as Eisenstein famously claimed that he does not create cinema, he creates Mexico and himself – *Je ne fais du cinéma, je fais du Mexique et moi!*⁵⁶ – and in line with his claim that he saw in Mexico an externalization of his internal states and interests, Frida's little girl with a death mask is an externalization of the painter's own world, but a very conscious and intentional one. Thus the two masks also reference the various pre-Columbian artefacts that Kahlo ardently collected, and the 'mask' of indigenism that she created for herself through her elaborate Tehuana costumes (exactly like those worn by the women in the 'Sandoga' episode of *Que viva México!*). Like Eisenstein, Kahlo was no stranger to the metaphors of auto-vivisection, autopsy, (self-)mutilation and sadomasochism, all used for subversive radical effect. She was not only an active member of the Mexican Communist Party but an avid reader and ardent follower of the 'true dialectics' and, like Eisenstein, in her copious diaries and letters applied the term to the analysis of her personal life and her relationships with Diego Rivera and Trotsky. While indebted to surrealism, the visceral, affective and aesthetic shock her paintings are intended to produce in the viewer is not entirely unlike the shock of Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions'. Finally, her own bisexuality and obsession with reproduction and

⁵⁵ See Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 64.

⁵⁶ Olivier Debroise, *Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein: México e Yo*. Unpublished manuscript.

motherhood make these issues as much a theme for Kahlo's work as they are for Eisenstein's.

However, in radical contrast to Eisenstein, sexual difference for Kahlo is simply not resolvable, even in the face of death, as is evident in the painting of *Girl with Death Mask*. It is precisely difference, and not the synthesis and the absolution of differences, that creates the stark and shocking effect of this work. The boundaries and differences are blurred and crossed, shown to be culturally and personally unstable and relative, and yet persistently incapable of resolution. Similarly, the commodification and objectification looming behind the death mask, which turns human into nonhuman, the violence that turns people into objects and things that is also behind the imagery of the Day of the Dead, is present with even more terrifying force in Kahlo's painting. Behind the theatrical performativity, aestheticization and even, arguably, the religious ecstasy of Kahlo's very real mutilation, both physical and emotional, lies real pain. The extrasemantic quality of death and violence is acknowledged. The dead foetus, which Eisenstein so lovingly holds in his palm in the famous 1930 photograph from Zurich, which he kept as a 'souvenir' in his Moscow apartment, for Kahlo was no mere object of abstract curiosity and theoretical interest. Because of her severe injuries, she suffered a series of miscarriages. She made a series of paintings on this subject, the most famous of which, *Henry Ford Hospital or The Flying Bed* (1932) depicts an aborted foetus, still linked to Frida's umbilical cord as she lies in bed, helpless and bleeding. This became a recurrent motif in all Kahlo's subsequent work.

In contrast with the utopian unity of Eisenstein's men in the 'Epilogue', Kahlo's *Girl with the Death Mask* is alone and completely isolated. However, even the disaster that ultimately prevented Eisenstein from ever completing the picture, the years of depression following his return to the Soviet Union and the terrifying reality of life under Stalin (and, for that matter, a rapid turn to the right in Mexico, of which Eisenstein must have been aware on some level) did not make the Soviet director any less of a believer in the utopian potential embodied in the images of Mexico that he captured on film. He returned to them again and again during the last years of his life. His mother's death on 14 August 1946 inspired Eisenstein to write perhaps his most extended passage about Mexico, parts of which have been quoted in this essay. After another detailed description of the celebration of the Day of the Dead, Eisenstein finishes the essay with the following sentence, in which the pain of loss is not truly overcome by hope and the metaphors of motherhood, perhaps for the only time in his oeuvre, resonate with pain:

The Day of the Dead is being circulated as a short, having no idea of its goal as crowning the tragic and ironic finale of a big poem of Life, Death, and Immortality, which has chosen Mexico in its conception, and which never was realized on the screen.

Let us use irony again to overcome this case of death – the death of

one's own progeny, who had been invested with so much love, labour and inspiration.⁵⁷

I would like to thank Olivier Debroise, Naum Kleiman, Katerina Clark, Charlie Musser, John MacKay, and Luca Caminati for invaluable help and their comments, and Annette Kuhn for her editorial advice. My special thanks to Lutz Becker who tracked down the original negatives and master prints of the film. His reconstruction of the film will be the ultimate and definitive interpretation of *Que viva México!* to date.

Feminist historiographies and the woman artist's biopic: the case of *Artemisia*

BELÉN VIDAL

The figure of the woman artist has been the subject of a significant number of contemporary films – often, but not necessarily, directed by women. Their stories centre on the artist's struggle to express her creative drive and gain social recognition against the constraints imposed by repressive historical environments. The topic is a familiar one in mainstream filmmaking, presenting multiple opportunities for spectacular historical frescos as well as for intimate melodramas. *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, France, 1988), *Yo, la peor de todas/I, the Worst of All* (María Luisa Bemberg, Argentina, 1990), *Les Enfants du siècle* (Diane Kurys, France, 1999), *Frida* (Julie Taymor, USA/Canada/Mexico, 2002), or *Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs, UK, 2003) show the range of strategies deployed by films that put under the spotlight women artists at odds with political hierarchies and social conventions. These film-portraits come to life against the legitimizing background of diverse artistic heritages and meticulous period reconstruction. But more interestingly, these are portraits persistently haunted by failure and loss. Romance stories gone wrong present contested spaces where the woman artist asserts her claim to a place in history.

These films blur the borders between fiction and history to produce new variations on an 'old' genre: the biographical picture or biopic. This essay investigates one particular example of the genre: the film *Artemisia* (Agnès Merlet, France/Italy, 1997) and the contexts for interpretation generated by its controversial critical reception. Set against the background of a grand European tradition – Italian Baroque

painting – but made as a French-language coproduction with a multinational cast, *Artemisia* illustrates the biopic's shifts and negotiations between the reflexive styles of the European art film (as well as the film about 'art') and the character-driven narratives of costume drama. The fact that the film failed to make an impact in both critical and popular terms suggests the extent to which such negotiations may be highly problematic. Yet *Artemisia* opens up significant discursive space around the figure of the woman artist on two fronts: on the one hand, with regard to the aesthetic and ideological implications of the biopic's fictionalized narratives, and on the other, with regard to the political usefulness of the genre for historicizing contemporary arguments on gender and authorship.

Artemisia poses a significant example of the postfeminist revisions of women's histories, as it deals with issues of feminine agency through the lens of romance. However, such acts of revision need to be understood in the light of the aesthetics of the contemporary period film, and through its modes of spectatorial address. In this respect, *Artemisia* works intertextually as much as narratively, foregrounding new formal variations on well-known cultural themes and images that are reinvested with new meanings in every new performance. In particular, I will be looking at the ways in which the double framing of the shot constitutes a privileged visual moment (and a site of enhanced visual pleasure), often producing effects close to the painterly tableau and the portrait. The incorporation of painterly and still images is a staple trope in biopics dealing with the trajectory of painters and visual artists, and one indicative of the hybrid makeup of the historical film. However, the double framing of the film image also introduces a visual *figure* in the text. Through an exploration of the themes of gazing, posing and framing, I argue that *Artemisia* reveals a transhistorical narrative portrait of the woman artist that builds on the work of period reconstruction in order to produce fictional scenarios of desire and self-representation. A close look at the textual figure of the portrait, central to the configurations of fantasy offered by the biopic, will show the ways in which *Artemisia* dramatizes the ongoing dialogue between previous feminist traditions – especially the narratives of second-wave feminism – and contemporary *postfeminist* revisions.

The contemporary biopic is culturally rooted in star-driven genre formulas cast in the mould of the conventions of classical storytelling,¹ and industrially situated in the traditions of quality cinema and television. Central to cinema's incursions into the lives of artists is the mystery of artistic genius. The biopic attempts to portray the uniqueness of the artist's talent more or less counterweighted by human fallibility – a trajectory which, as Griselda Pollock has noted, more often than not entails the commodification of art through the conventions of the romanticized biography.² A significant case in point is *Lust for Life* (Vincente Minnelli, USA, 1956), a life of Vincent Van Gogh, famously incarnated by Kirk Douglas. As Pollock has noted, the *mise-en-scène*

1 See the influential study by George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

2 Griselda Pollock, 'Artists [sic] mythologies and media genius, madness and art history', *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1980), p. 67.

establishes a straightforward cause–effect relationship between biographical incident, external context and the artwork:

In *Lust for Life*, the spectator is positioned as viewer of pictures produced by photographic representations through which Van Gogh is placed as a figure in his own landscape paintings. At the same time, these landscapes are offered as externalised, visualised images of the artist's 'inner' landscape. These dual processes not only foreclose notions of the production of art as a signifying system but propose that the meanings of works of art are available to direct visual experience which can be represented unproblematically, simply reconstructed in a film. Through the narrative organisation of a filmic biography, lavishly illustrated and illustrating, what is realised and confirmed is the construct of the artist as the effect of his works, the hero of the story, the character whose 'truth' is to be sought and visualized, reconstructed and made plain.³

3 Ibid., p. 95.

The desire for 'reconstruction', 'visualization' and 'illustration' is a persistent feature in the problematic relationship between cinema and painting in films that adapt key episodes of art history into narratives of creative genius. Such films usually revolve around a vigorous portrait of the artist, reinforced by energetic star performances – take Douglas in *Lust for Life*, or the identification between artist and performer in *Pollock* (USA, 2000), directed by and starring Ed Harris as painter Jackson Pollock. These films encounter the same problems as the classical (literary) adaptation: issues of authenticity and fidelity may not encumber their popularity, but their fictionalized narratives around the creation of well-known masterpieces pose similar problems in the transit from specialized discourses into the sphere of entertainment and mass consumption. In this regard, the above characterization of the (classical) biopic in terms of 'illustration' does not satisfactorily account for the cultural gesture implicit in the *reframing* of the artwork as part of a fictional narrative. To refer back to Griselda Pollock, in this new narrative landscape the artist becomes, visually and metaphorically, both subject *and* figure. Taking this notion one step further, the centrality of the artwork in the visual textures of the contemporary biopic suggests the need for a critical shift: rather than highlighting the 'narrativization' of the artwork's meanings through contextual and biographical incident, it may be more productive to examine the ways in which the visual emphasis on the production of the work of art functions as a fantasy scenario that structures the biopic's layered narrative. In this respect, the self-portrait, with its implied conflation of the positions of subject and object, may be a more useful trope to conceptualize the problems posed by *Artemisia* and, more generally, by the reception of the woman artist's biopic.

The film has caused a remarkable controversy due to its treatment of the historical facts known about the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, and its portrayal of the artist as a young woman (played by twenty-year-old

Valentina Cervi). Gentileschi is often credited in art histories as the first woman painter in western art and, as such, her name carries a considerable weight in feminist art historical discourses. As I shall show, her mature portraits of biblical heroines have been read as an outspoken critique of the oppression of women in the patriarchal society of her time. The film, however, unfolds like a coming-of-age drama, focusing on Artemisia's transition from adolescence into adulthood, and on her breakthrough as an artist. *Artemisia* first presents Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652) in 1610 as a feisty young woman with a passionate interest in painting, who works as apprentice in the studio of her father, Orazio Gentileschi (Michel Serrault), assisting him in works commissioned by the aristocracy and the Church. As a woman, she is banned from entering the Academy to receive formal training. Artemisia therefore persuades her father to let her take lessons with a visiting painter, Agostino Tassi (Miki Manojlovic). Agostino introduces Artemisia to the use of perspectival instruments for the purposes of landscape painting and composition; she is, however, more interested in the human figure. As she spies on a couple making love on the beach, and on the nocturnal activities of Agostino and his friends in a local brothel, her fascination with the human body is intertwined with her awakening sexual desire. When she asks Agostino to pose as a model for her canvas *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, he makes violent advances towards her, believing her to be sexually active. After a first traumatic sexual encounter for the young woman, teacher and pupil become lovers. When Orazio finds out, he takes Agostino to court on charges of seduction and rape. Artemisia's canvas is then used as proof of her sexual experience, presenting her as the seducer of her teacher. In the process, the young woman is confronted with the evidence of Agostino's shady past of adultery and womanizing, but she refuses to back her father's claim and force Agostino to marry her as reparation, instead remaining silent. In order to extract the truth about her virginity, Artemisia is tortured by having fine cords tightened around her fingers. To end this mutilation, Agostino admits to having raped her and is sentenced to prison. Artemisia survives and prepares to leave Rome and her father's house, embarking on a future as a mature artist.

The film could be termed 'feminist' since it foregrounds the woman artist's struggle for self-expression and professional independence against the repressive backdrop of Christian ideology and the patriarchal establishment. However, such a narrative develops within a mise-en-scene of sexual awakening and heterosexual romance. *Artemisia* thus covers similar ground to other recent costume fictions such as *The Piano* (Jane Campion, Australia/New Zealand/France, 1993) or *The Governess* (Sandra Goldbacher, UK, 1997),⁴ and is particularly indebted to the sexual narrative and the figurative universe of *The Piano*. The central motif of the perspectival grid planted by the seascape in *Artemisia* powerfully recalls the culture/nature dyad implicit in *The Piano*'s iconic image – the piano stranded on a deserted New Zealand shore. Stella Bruzzi has argued that *The Piano* provides an innovative 'sexual model'

4 See Belén Vidal, 'Playing in a minor key: the literary past through the feminist imagination', in Mireia Aragay (ed.), *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 263–85.

5 Stella Bruzzi, 'Jane Campion: costume drama and reclaiming women's past', in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), *Women and Film: a Sight and Sound Reader* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996), p. 233.

6 See Mary D. Garrard, 'Artemisia and Susanna', in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 147–71, and *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

7 Mary D. Garrard and Gloria Steinem, 'Now that you've seen the film, meet the real Artemisia Gentileschi', at <http://songweaver.com/art/artemesia.html>, accessed 16 January 2006.

8 Griselda Pollock first documented these critical reactions in 'A hungry eye' (1998), reprinted in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Literature/Heritage: a Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 32. From here on I will be citing from the updated and extended version of this piece, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', in Mieke Bal (ed.), *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 169–206.

9 Mary D. Garrard, 'Artemisia's trial by cinema', *Art in America*, vol. 86, no. 10 (1998), pp. 65, 67.

in women's filmmaking. The film suggests a form of reclaiming the past that unearths hidden aspects of feminine sexual identity but which also complicates basic feminist narratives with representations of female sexuality that test the limits of liberal feminism. This model can be mapped most clearly onto a 1990s as opposed to a 1970s 'liberal' model of feminist narratives that concentrates on finding 'a political and ideological affinity between the struggles of women in the present and figures from the past'.⁵ Narratives of struggle and self-realization help to establish parallels between the political struggles of second- and first-wave feminism in films such as *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, Australia, 1979). In contrast, both *The Piano* and *Artemisia* notoriously dwell on scenarios of sexual objectification and abuse that expose not only the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression but also the taboos of feminine desire.

However, unlike *The Piano*, *Artemisia*'s circulation as a historical biopic raises problematic issues of 'authenticity' and 'fidelity' as dominant interpretation. Upon its release in the USA, the film was caught in a heated controversy regarding the archival records that it purported to dramatize (the transcripts from the rape trial) and, as a result, it was strongly accused of misrepresenting what was factually a sexual crime as a romantic love story. This line of criticism was upheld by Mary D. Garrard's intervention at the time of the film's US release. Garrard, an expert in Gentileschi's oeuvre, represents a feminist discourse that casts Gentileschi in the role of the 'female hero' of canonical painting, drawing close links between biographical contextualization and interpretation of her paintings.⁶ On the eve of the film's New York premiere, Garrard and the writer and activist Gloria Steinem, outraged at Miramax's intention to use the conventional 'based on a true story' tag in promotional posters for the film, circulated a 'fact sheet' (later posted online)⁷ contrasting the account of the painter's life in the film with the 'real Artemisia Gentileschi'. Under headings contrasting 'THE MYTHS' and 'HISTORY', the tract highlights the perils of popular adaptations when they come into conflict with the doxa of established historical record.⁸ Garrard's own interpretation of the trial records puts forth the image of an articulate Artemisia, openly denouncing her rapist and courageously fashioning her art as an (un)conscious response to her vulnerability within, and outrage at, a masculinist society. In contrast, the film presents, according to Garrard, an 'inversion of the basic facts of the story' that 'inappropriately sexualizes what are really artistic interests' and transforms the character into an 'artistic ingenue grateful to her sexually exploitative teacher'.⁹ For Garrard, the sexualization of the artist in *Artemisia* colludes with the stereotypes that have contributed to the marginalization of women artists in canonical histories of art.

Garrard's demolition of the film is consistent with the critical evaluation of the biopic genre from the viewpoint of the historian. On the one hand, the artist's film biography sustains the myth of the individual artist as ultimate source of meaning of the work, which prevails in both

10 Pollock, 'Artists mythologies', p. 58.

11 Ibid., p. 65.

12 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 193.

13 Susan Felleman, *Art in the Cinematic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 140–41.

14 For a different view on *Pollock*, more critical of the representation of Lee Krasner (Marcia Gay Harden) in the film, see *ibid.*, p. 151.

15 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 206.

16 Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 98.

humanistic and psychoanalytic accounts of art history, as well as in literary history.¹⁰ On the other, the discourses of art history need to separate themselves from popular accounts of the lives of artists, in order to secure their legitimacy. Relatedly, the main criticism levelled against *Artemisia* concerned its gendered representation of artistic creation. It should be noted that the category of 'mad genius' that has become commonplace in both historical and popular narratives has, according to Pollock, 'little to do with clinical pathology or definitions of sanity, but circle[s] around categories of difference, otherness, excess'.¹¹ When discussing female artists, however, the notion of mad genius takes on an altogether different inflection. As Pollock notes:

Clearly, the conflation of the artist's biography and the works of art by that artist functions very differently if the artist is a woman or a man. In the latter case, his art appears to give us access to the generic mystery of (masculine) genius; in the former case, blurring life and art merely confirms the pathology of the feminine, saturated by her sex, of which she becomes emblem and symptom. Her biography, therefore, is always made to hinge around a powerfully sexual, male figure.¹²

Pollock points to the regularity with which the mainstream biopic works on a mixture of daring sexuality, overwhelming passion and tragedy, bound to crystallize around the woman artist's relationship with a (usually older) male artist doubling as mentor and lover. This scenario sustains what Susan Felleman, also very critical of Merlet's film, has called 'the myth of origins': a fantasy in which the work of art figures as 'the progeny of sexual passion . . . the child of the artist-parents'. The biopic thus recreates a primal scene which often involves 'a young woman artist who is apprenticed to an older male, a relation of power and gender that is at the same time entirely realistic and profoundly mythic'.¹³ This would apply to films ranging from *Camille Claudel* to *Frida*. However, the woman artist's biopic in the 1990s often puts the emphasis not (or not only) on lifelong attachments and tragic lives but rather on 'survival' scenarios. This is certainly the case with *Frida*, but also in *Surviving Picasso* (James Ivory, USA, 1996) and *Pollock*, in both of which the mythic artist's female partner, *a priori* overshadowed by his 'genius', nevertheless emerges as the more resilient of the two, and as an artist in her own right.¹⁴ The survival narrative pervades the rewritings carried out by these biopics and clearly informs the filmic portrait of *Artemisia*, which would contradict in the first instance the idea of the woman artist as the 'sacrificial victim' to the perpetuation of myths around female sexuality and creativity.¹⁵

The accusation that *Artemisia* muffles the 'reality of history' and the threat posed by *Artemisia*'s paintings to the established social order, raises, in turn, questions about the threat posed by works of fiction to academic orthodoxy. We should ask, with Pollock, 'what does feminism desire in looking at work by *women* artists?'¹⁶ This question is even more relevant when considering popular texts that provide their own feminist

17 Susana Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005), p. 39.

18 See Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 183; also Scarparo's comparison in 'Reinventing the 'real': Artemisia Gentileschi and Anna Banti', in *Elusive Subjects*, pp. 1–40.

19 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 170.

narratives outside the discourses of scholarly feminism. The film adaptation of the protofeminist cultural construct 'Artemisia Gentileschi' was caught in the double bind of being *required* to function not only as an illustration of the paintings themselves, but also of feminist narratives that have facilitated their inclusion into the canon. As Susanna Scarparo has noted, the attacks on the film on the basis of its lack of historical accuracy unveil a parallel history – that of feminist writers' self-identification with Artemisia as a model for their own struggle: for Scarparo, the significance of Merlet's film is located in the debates it spawned, and the ways in which these debates can 'help us write a story of the past thirty years of feminist scholarship and its connections with the history of feminisms in the 1990s'.¹⁷ In this respect, *Artemisia* can be productively approached through a reflective history of competing discourses and interpretations which surround a figure already claimed by different generations of women artists and thinkers. In this history, Anna Banti's 1947 novel *Artemisia* features prominently. Banti's 'autobiographical' fiction unfolds as an imaginary dialogue between the present-day woman artist (a writer who tries to come to terms with the loss of her manuscript on Artemisia Gentileschi in the tumultuous last days of World War II) and the historical figure of Artemisia, imagined as a fictional character with whom the author dialogues. In the writer's struggle to rescue her predecessor from oblivion, Artemisia is invoked as a guiding light for the modern artist's predicament.

The modernist self-reflexivity of Banti's novel and its dialogic mode of address have put it in the position of 'good object' for many critics in direct contrast with Merlet's *Artemisia*, consistently pinpointed as the 'bad object' of feminist inquiry on the grounds of biopic's preference for illustration and reconstruction, and its tendency to reinstate the mythic structures of bourgeois realism.¹⁸ Popular film's alleged inadequacy in dealing imaginatively and responsibly with crucial issues in feminist histories – to develop, in Pollock's nuanced turn of argument, a compelling 'ethics of reading' beyond a superficial adherence to or rejection of a 'politics of truth'¹⁹ – denies the ways in which romance biopics such as *Artemisia* may legitimately insert themselves into the larger framework of inquiry identified by feminist historiography, and pose similarly pertinent questions about identity and subjectivity. In order to discern to what extent Merlet's *Artemisia* may enable us to do both, comparative analysis of a literary and a film text situated at different historical conjunctures (not to mention using different semiotic systems) is ultimately unhelpful, since each belongs to a different moment in an ongoing layering of feminist histories. Rather, my contention is that a closer look at the biopic's specific strategies of figuration may cast in a different light the film's intervention in, and reframing of, the politics of feminist historiography.

In order to situate the cultural work of the contemporary biopic, it is necessary to recast the terms of the debate within the distance between two different moments in feminist film theory and practice: a first

20 Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In focus: postfeminism and contemporary media studies', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2005), p. 107.

21 See Karen Boyle's overview of these debates in 'Feminism without men: feminist media studies in a post-feminist age', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society: Fourth Edition* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp. 31–3.

22 See Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: the Fortunes of Women Painters and their Work* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), pp. 189–207. This work predates Mary Garrard's recuperation of Gentileschi's art (see note 6).

moment associated with 1970s feminist criticism and avant-garde filmmaking – in which women's cinema expressed the need for a different articulation of desire outside the limits of visual pleasure and narrative cinema – and the current postfeminist moment, in which such pleasures have been reclaimed from Cultural Studies and spectatorship-driven perspectives. 'Postfeminism' is a problematic term that has come to question the viability and even the desirability of feminism(s) in contemporary media culture, where, as has been noted by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'certain kinds of female agency are recognizably and profitably packaged as commodities'.²⁰ However, we must be careful before periodizing the current postfeminist moment in a linear fashion as superseding previous feminist cultures. As has been noted, postfeminism also refers to a tension between the legacy of the historically specific vocabulary (and histories) of (second-wave) feminism, and the retreat into a (prefeminist) conception of femininity.²¹

It is in this respect that *Artemisia* constitutes a significant instance of women's cinema at the crossroads. The film manoeuvres between the aesthetics of art cinema and the industrial pressures of mainstream circulation. The latter become especially evident if we consider the promotional materials accompanying the US distribution of the film. The film poster and DVD cover of the film produced by Miramax are notable in the way they sex up the biopic with the publicity tag 'her forbidden passion changed the face of History', and disguise it with the trappings of an (actually non-existent in the film) teen romance. Perhaps more significantly, the film is torn between the narratives around the woman artist's exclusion and 'exceptionality'.²² (endorsed by the closing titles that serve as epilogue to the story: 'Artemisia Gentileschi became the first female member of the Academy in Florence and was the first woman in the history of art to be commissioned for her work'), and her sexualization as a desiring young girl 'just like any other'. These apparent contradictions can help us to think how the contemporary biopic reworks the legacy of criticism inspired by 1970s feminism through a return to women's narratives. Its specificity is located in its modes of address and rewriting, and the ways it inflects inherited narratives and idioms through new reading gestures.

This is what modernist feminist texts achieve in exemplary manner. One of the most celebrated is Sally Potter's *Thriller* (UK, 1979), which deconstructs highbrow art – Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème* (1896) – and classic narrative aesthetics with the tools of the thriller, finding in them a cultural formation built on the (sensationalist) repression (or killing) of femininity and difference. More recently, Chantal Akerman's *La captive/The Captive* (France/Belgium, 2000) proposes a reworking of Marcel Proust's formal experimentation via intertextual reference to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (USA, 1958). As these films suggest, women's cinema has used diverse modes of adaptation as an oppositional practice, frustrating oedipal narrative structures by making intelligible the alienation of woman within them.

In the context of mainstream filmmaking, though, the radical strategies associated with this strand of 1970s feminist criticism need to be 'adapted' to address the varied responses offered by contemporary women's narratives to our enduring fascination with both visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In late 1990s films, the reclaiming of women's pasts that characterized previous instances of 'liberal' costume drama (as noted by Bruzzi) has become the intertext of 'sexual' costume drama. If the contemporary biopic is to be considered postfeminist it is not because it has forgotten the lessons of feminism or because it regards them as obsolete; on the contrary, it is my contention that the contemporary biopic shows a renewed engagement with the formative narratives of feminism – the struggle for women's self-expression; the identification between women artists now and then – while filtering them through the politics of romance.

In *Artemisia*, the writerly space of the past is reconfigured through the anachronistic gestures of self-portraiture. Rather than posing as a biographical journey, that is, as a narrative concerned with the evolution of the artist in linear 'historical' time, *Artemisia* foregrounds a synchronic, spatial structure that sustains the fantasy scenario of the woman artist's sexual and creative awakening. The film works only imperfectly as a (classical) biopic, disregarding linear chronology in the presentation of Gentileschi's works and concentrating on just a short period in her life. *Artemisia* rather refocuses the biopic as self-portrait: both literally – a great emphasis is placed on the way the artist portrays herself (as 'Lucretia' or 'Judith') at different moments – and metaphorically, with the film imagining its subject through a coming-of-age story that climaxes in a reflexive self-portrait of the woman as artist. In this regard, fantasy, a psychoanalytical construct arising from the revision of the main tenets of 1970s film theory, provides a useful framework for investigating how the biopic about the woman artist rewrites the past in order to fulfil a desire for critical agency and visual/narrative pleasure.

The term 'fantasy' refers to the conscious and unconscious formations releasing the desire that has been repressed or censored by the psychic mechanisms of the subject. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define fantasy not as an object of desire but as an 'imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish . . . in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes'.²³ Film provides generative matrices of fantasy that facilitate the translation of social representations (public fantasies) into subjectivity and self-representation (private fantasies).²⁴ Fantasy is not, however, a straightforward decoding process that ends with the subjection to the ideological work of narrative: it involves an active encoding process that starts in the text itself, and in its mechanisms of writing and address.²⁵

In the classical Freudian formulation 'A child is being beaten',²⁶ the fantasy unfolds as an elaborate scene producing an unstable subject

²³ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 314 (my emphasis).

²⁴ Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, quoted in Patricia White, *UnInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 196.

²⁵ White, *UnInvited*, p. 205.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, "'A child is being beaten': a contribution to the study of the origin of sexual perversions" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 175–204.

27 D.N. Rodowick, *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 72. See Rodowick's detailed analysis of the beating fantasy, pp. 70–84.

28 See White's analysis of fantasy in connection with the ways in which the reconstruction of queer viewing processes ('retrospectatorship') produces a different context for the understanding of the classic Hollywood text, in *UnInvited*, pp. 194–215.

29 Richard Burt, *Renaissance Remakes: Post-National Film and Video* (forthcoming). I thank the author for allowing access to his work in progress.

30 Ibid.

configured through the successive/simultaneous scenarios of voyeurism and identification. The fantasy stages the subjection of the expression of desire to the sanction of the Symbolic order, and develops as a series of transactions between masculine and feminine identifications. These transactions prepare the way for the oedipal and the castration conflict, which – according to Freudian doctrine – will be resolved into the production of normative identities: an active sexual position in the case of boys and a passive one in the case of girls. However, as D.N. Rodowick has pointed out, 'the phantasy is . . . the product of an explicitly ideological struggle between desire and the Law that is never resolved. Rather, the very architecture of phantasy is an unconscious evasion of the demands of patriarchal law.'²⁷ This analysis suggests that fantasy can be explored as a scene of potentiality, and not solely as the imprint of the ready-made scenario of secondary elaboration. Fantasy can generate multiple scripts in continuous negotiation with the closing down of meaning effected by narrative desire. The operations of reading produce a framework that restores the conditions of intelligibility of the text – conditions subject to the historical and cultural matrices of spectatorship, yet offering each time around renewed possibilities of representability.²⁸ This has crucial implications for the intertextual processes of reconstruction and 'illustration' in the historical film. My point is that fantasy offers a framework to investigate how postmodern adaptations of historical/literary texts (a mode in which the period biopic functions) do their own work of revision, whose processes need be completed and textualized through the spectator's positioning.

We need to take into account that in the (post-classical) romance narrative of the biopic, the structures of repetition are actualized through an awareness of gender difference as a discursive strategy, and through the attendant gestures of rewriting (which separates these films from the classical woman's film or melodrama). Richard Burt has pointed out that academic discourses and popular 'afterlives' of canonical works actually show a degree of interpenetration. The latter offer a supplementary reading that does not necessarily clash with academic discourses, but rather sets the terms for a critique of previous feminist narratives through the prism of fantasy and loss.²⁹ The academic narrative constructed by Garrard and others, which represents the painter as a 'female hero' able to textualize the impact of trauma in her work (her rape providing the ultimate explanation to her defiant portraits of women), is but one reading of the construct 'Artemisia Gentileschi', which underlies the portrait of the artist as costume-drama heroine. Burt suggests that, in contrast with scholarly histories that seek to redeem the woman artist without any loss to her position as a critic of patriarchy, romantic popular narratives reinvent her into a myriad 'loser characters', who 'do not desire what they are supposed to desire, whether their desire is prescribed by patriarchs, feminists, or queers . . . their desire is represented as enigmatic, lacking, even perverse'.³⁰ As I shall show, self-objectification and masochism are writ large alongside identification and empowerment.

This approach helps reframe the popular practice of the biopic within postmodern discourses of cultural dissemination, bringing to light the discursive interactions (rather than the breakdown in communication) between mass-media and academic constructions of one particular (fantasy) matrix, 'Artemisia Gentileschi'. In the spatial actualizations of fantasy, past and present cease to be stable, mutually exclusive points of reference. Fantasy thus allows us to get beyond the question of identification, and move into the wider possibilities of reconstructing historical identities as *composite*, hybrid entities, negotiated through competing and overlapping textual layerings – and through the discontinuities, as well as the continuities, between 'past' and 'present' as signifying structures. Fantasy thus allows for an important critical shift: from the exploration of authorship (as we have seen, always problematic when we deal with the popular biopic) to a metaphor for spectatorship.

In *Artemisia*, an authentic historical document – Gentileschi's canvas *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (ca 1620) – grounds the fiction on history. This celebrated painting functions as one of the central points of reference of the film, but also as a hieroglyph whose cultural meanings are in continuous fluctuation. The biopic is concerned with the decoding of its cultural referent in a narrative scenario that climaxes in the moment of artistic creation. However, by rewriting the past as a hybrid intertextual space, the film articulates a double consciousness, suturing a contemporary feminist consciousness into the representation of historical femininity.

This overlaying of temporalities and modes of consciousness becomes manifest in the figuration of the artist's 'desire' throughout the film. Diverse commentators have noted the centrality of the (feminine) gaze in the film, manifested in the repeated motif of closeups of the painter's eyes. For Pollock, Artemisia's 'hungry eye' acts as synecdoche for the woman artist *qua* (cannibalistic) desiring subject, 'desiring to see, to know, to participate in the jumble of expressively naked bodies, in the mysteries of representation'.³¹ The hungry eye works as a powerful metaphor not just for the artist's vision, but for the sexualization of aesthetic experience. Artemisia's desire to understand the human body is mixed with adolescent sexual curiosity. Felleman notes:

The film conceives Artemisia as passionate looker, or voyeur: she shamelessly provokes a youthful male companion to undress for her; peeks into Tassi's windows one night and gleefully watches the orgy she spies; and generally is shown as hungry for visual pleasure. The almost demented, eroticized gaze attributed to Artemisia in this film seems to suggest a psychosexual pathology, scopophilia, sexual pleasure in looking. Interestingly, *Artemisia* attributes this usually male 'perversion' to its female protagonist, even as her agency is

31 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 198.

32 Felleman, *Art in the Cinematic Imagination*, pp. 145–6.

33 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 200.

34 All dialogue from the film is transcribed (with minor adjustments) from the subtitles available in the US DVD edition of the film. *Artemisia* DVD (Miramax, 2001).

eclipsed by the film's tendency to translate her from subject to object.³²

This emphasis on looking relations (along the lines of Laura Mulvey's critique of visual pleasure in classical cinema) constitutes a metanarrative that has worked as a totalizing structure in the reception of the film. Likewise, Pollock stresses 'the repeated dislocation of woman as eye and woman as seen', which attests to the film's failure to conceptualize Gentileschi's historical negotiation in terms of a cinematic semiotic practice that can articulate a contemporary feminist critique.³³ This collapsing of vision into the dominant figure of the gaze obliterates two other figurative lines of force in the film: the corporeality of the body – especially the body at work – and the voice as source of inscription and interpretation. In contrast with the dyad subject/object of vision, this triangular relation is instrumental in the dynamic construction of the double consciousness of the film; it helps establish a temporal dissociation between 'seeing' and 'knowing', key to the film's self-conscious reflection on vision and power developed through period reconstruction.

The opening sequence already states the interrelation between all three elements, as the credits roll over an extreme closeup of an eye in which candlelight is reflected. This image establishes the artist's radical subjectivity as origin of the narrative – a body metaphorically reduced to a giant eye. The next shot, however, does not establish the field of vision but cuts away to a black screen. The first of a series of short voiceover monologues is then heard in the soundtrack: 'A pointed finger. Drapery. A raised hand. A leg which is not a leg but an arm. A confused ballet of gigantic bodies. The sweeping movement of the limbs'.³⁴ Artemisia's voice imaginatively describes the murals that she observes in the chapel at the convent school in Rome. Her free-floating voice occurs six times in the film, establishing a counterpoint to her mobile eye, but also producing a space both inside and outside diegetic reality. The soundtrack undermines the two-way relationship of 'illustration' between image and discourse: the overtly poetic monologues attempt to capture the dynamic movement of bodies, as imagined by the painter. Unlike in biopics such as *Surviving Picasso* and *Frida*, the verbal descriptions refuse to narrativize painting, preserving its 'strangeness' as a domain of shapes and colour in perpetual movement, resistant to symbolization. Through this poetic device, the artist's voice is figured as an anachronistic, modern intervention, creating an interval between the moment of vision and (historical) reflection – between the closeness of the eye and the power to *see*. The huge eye in the opening shot is thus implicitly blinded, and the gaze is located in the imagination, in a different time, space and mode of consciousness.

This abstract opening is immediately followed by a sequence in which the young woman practises her drawing skills by studying the only human body she can possibly have access to: her own. In the secrecy of

Fig. 1

The body at work. All stills from the DVD of *Artemisia* (Agnès Merlet, 1997), distributed by Miramax, 2001.



35 Pollock, 'Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem', p. 199.

her convent cell, Artemisia draws her naked body with the sole aid of a mirror and a candle stolen from the chapel. This scene has been criticized as one of the instances of objectification of the female body of which the film has been accused.³⁵ However, it also conveys urgency and painstaking dedication, suggesting a form of visual pleasure that is rarely seen in film: the concentration and defiance of the body at work. The scene exposes the feminine body but *signifies* a body unavailable to the erotic gaze; an active body, not in contemplation or abandonment, but indifferent to the viewer and bent into a task. The shots of Artemisia examining parts of her body in the mirror, and forcing her body into tension, do not just offer themselves to the viewer but produce an awareness of an outside – as well as an internal – gaze (figure 1).

Mieke Bal's distinction between the 'gaze' and the 'glance' as 'viewing attitudes or modes proposed, encouraged, but not enforced by the work' is relevant to the scene in question. In her analysis of a series of nude sketches by Rembrandt, Bal distinguishes the 'gaze' that conflates model and figure, effacing the traces of the labour of representation, from the 'glance' that emphasizes the viewer's own position as viewer. This distinction, embedded in the visual text, can be extended to the ambiguity of the mise-en-scene of Artemisia at work. For Bal, the indifference of the body at work constitutes in itself a resistance to voyeurism: 'the very fact that the choice between glance and gaze is emphatically proposed to the viewer is in itself an obstacle to the smooth, self-effacing gaze. This is the paradox of self-reflexive art.'³⁶ Through rapid editing, the body gets displaced into a mobile closeup of a hand, the painter's hand, a motif suggesting outward action and production rather than interiority and identification.³⁷ The scene is all about the structural necessity of looking (in order to be able to know, as synonymous with action) and the impossibility of *not* looking. When the symbolic economy of Christian ideology (signified through the dominant presence of the crucifix in the setting) precludes women's open access to the study of the naked body,

36 Mieke Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 146.

37 For an interpretation of the 'hand' motif and the processes of creation in the masculine biopic, see Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), pp. 94–5.

narcissism *and* voyeurism become the royal road to knowledge for the young woman painter.

The film encourages throughout the association of *posing* with work; a literal effort produced by the body under pressure, but also a form of resistance to the transparent, appropriating gaze. *Artemisia*'s emphasis on the body contextualizes the artist's creative work as a professional activity regulated by institutional dictates, patronage, rivalries and rigid hierarchies that exclude women from positions of power and knowledge. 'Work' (paid effort, patronized by those who can afford to have their portrait painted, as Orazio tells Artemisia) is the necessary counterpoint to the production of 'art' (effort done for oneself). Thus, *Artemisia* remaps terrain already covered by *Passion* (Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1982), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, UK, 1986), or *La belle noiseuse* (Jacques Rivette, France/Switzerland, 1991) in its grasp of the economics of art, as well as the dynamics of power underlying the painter/model relationship. Directly after the title of the film appears on the screen, the camera cranes back to disclose a tableau – the Annunciation – framed, lit and performed by live models according to the rhetorics of Counter-Reformation Baroque art. At its centre, the boy in the role of Archangel Gabriel hangs from ropes pulled by assistants, among them Artemisia herself. Orazio, in front of the canvas, orchestrates the representation and demands 'Just a little more effort' so he can finish the work. The scene recalls Godard's *Passion*, which presents onscreen the space of production usually kept offscreen (the camera and film crew), and reframes the space of representation through live reconstructions of classic paintings. In the same spirit, *Artemisia* continuously shifts the emphasis from the individual artist to the workshop – a metaphor with all the trappings (the collective effort, the hustle and bustle of people and machinery, the orchestration by one 'artist') of the film set.

There are other kinds of work going on in *Artemisia* alongside the production of art: forms of gendered and class-marked work which do not distract from the main narrative, and yet challenge a holistic reading of the narrative, driving the eye to the detail. While Orazio 'creates', women at work surround him: his wife sews, indifferent to the male model posing in the nude, Artemisia puts the finishing touches to a commissioned portrait, the maid sweeps the floor. Likewise, in the scene in which Agostino gives Artemisia a lesson in landscape painting, not only are their bodies double framed by the perspectival grid, but so are those of peasants working in the background, gathering fruit from the trees and gleaning from the ground. Work is not always confined to the margins of the frame: in the church where Orazio and Agostino work on the frescoes, the frame also captures other kinds of work. Two people skinning a rabbit share the frame with Orazio and Artemisia, who complains to her father about Agostino's 'stealing work from under your nose'. Modelling, above all, is *work* – work entailing a gender-bound and class-bound hierarchy of power. The anonymous young man posing

naked for the painting of St Joseph does professionally what Artemisia forces Fulvio, a young fisherman, to do for free, as she ‘naturally’ assumes the superior position of the artist. Furthermore, the mise-en-scene highlights the underlying parallels between the workshop and the brothel. Local girls are paraded naked in front of the painters as objects from which to pick and choose (and, implicitly, to be ‘used’ and discarded), whereas at the local brothel women perform as both sex workers and models for erotic drawings. From the beginning, Artemisia fully grasps these dynamics. When Agostino, in their first encounter, takes her for a model, she responds angrily: ‘I only pose for my paintings!’

Posing takes on a further dimension through the use of a period artefact – the wooden painting grid used by artists as an aid to perspectival composition – that works not only as a narrative motif throughout the film but also as a mobile visual figure within the frame. The recurrent motif of framing and posing produces a textual figure which self-reflexively points to the constructed nature of images of the past. The effect is one of double framing, where the painterly image that validates the period reconstruction also produces a *mise-en-abyme* of the film image as representation. The tableau works as a discursive figure of (dis)continuity (between the painted and the filmic): a hybrid form of inscription that sets the scene for a construction of femininity whose anachronistic gesture positions it in direct relation to fantasy.

The painting grid becomes the centre of symbolic relations and source of metaphoric ambiguity, as it double frames the film frame into a metaphor for vision and the struggle over power. As Pollock reminds us,

Perspective, more than a useful skill, represented not merely a technology for the production of the illusion of space on two-dimensional surfaces; it was a discursive construction of a world and a way of establishing an ideological relation to that world, measured, mastered, displayed, legible, rational, mathematically calculable. Perspective rendered visually represented space symbolic.³⁸

In the film, reference to the techniques of academic painting is dramatized by the battle of sexes. The visual technologies of classical painting perform as technologies of gender³⁹ which exclude women from artistic and scientific hegemonic discourses. The mise-en-scene aligns masculinity with the principle of scientific realism, whereas practices that deviate from the norm are associated specifically with feminine positions of resistance. The struggle between Artemisia’s interest in close-range painting and the normative rules of perspective becomes the symbolic struggle for the frame (of representation): the frame of painting, and the *film* frame of reading, is the arena where the gender/power relations take place – where vision is *engendered*.

Agostino is not portrayed as a mentor or a superior artist for Artemisia to look up to. Significantly enough, none of his works is shown in the film, reflecting the fact that his production, unlike Orazio’s or

38 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 113.

39 I am borrowing the concept from Teresa De Lauretis: see her *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

Fig. 2
Hypnotized.



Caravaggio's, would leave no trace in Artemisia's formative years. He admits to knowing nothing about colour; all he can do is instruct Artemisia in complying with the norms of academic painting. In his first lesson in perspectival technique, Agostino takes Artemisia outdoors and he asks her to stand in front of the grid *and close her eyes*, much to her incredulity and distrust. Her gaze is replaced by the hypnotic effect of the master's voice: 'The earth invades the composition. It occupies almost all of the centre. . . . On the horizon, the earth circumscribes the water. It holds it back. And the sun . . . the sun dances on the water, forming a shimmering path that comes to meet us wherever we are.' Agostino's poetic recreation of painting as image *in movement* is germane to Artemisia's deeply cinematic vision, and she falls under his spell. Throughout the scene the painting grid doubles the film frame, introducing a closed space that inscribes a hierarchy of symbolic relations rather than the 'window open to the world' that Artemisia at first believes the grid to be. Agostino's poetic speech creates for Artemisia the illusion of complete realism – simultaneous *seeing* and *knowing*. However, at this moment, Agostino's voice literally supplants Artemisia's eye, and the grid frames her, containing her like a cage (figure 2).

This sequence in particular attracted strong criticism as it seemed to collapse the woman artist's vision with her 'to-be-looked-at-ness' by default, as actualized by the mise-en-scene. For Felleman, the sequence is all about female objectification; she notes that 'we join the seducer in effacing the spectacle of nature – or rather, taking its place – and taking Artemisia herself as spectacle, objectifying her, as women are so often, so typically, objectified by the gaze of the painter, or the camera'.⁴⁰ A slow pan isolates Artemisia in the film frame for a moment, and then reframes Agostino standing opposite and contemplating her through the grid. This blocking of the actors within the medium closeup shot precludes the camera's full identification with the man's point of view. Artemisia's eyes may be closed as she is trapped inside the grid, but there

40 Felleman, *Art in the Cinematic Imagination*, p. 143.

Fig. 3
 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith
 Staying Holofernes* (ca 1620).
 Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.



is another grid at work, which frames Agostino as hypnotizer, inducing her to see what she only sees with her mind's eye in a moment of sensual connection between teacher and pupil. The double framing of the image enacts the workings of romance as a *mise-en-scène* of vision and blindness. The seascape that Agostino describes is withheld from view – only the struggle for the mastery of representation remains in plain sight. By asking to learn the rules of (academic) painting, Artemisia enters the Symbolic as the perfect subject of ideology – that is, with her eyes closed: blinded. *Seeing is not knowing*. The moment of interpretation (the distance that allows for a feminist critique) can only come with second sight.

The first 'lesson in vision' produces a moment of suspension that throws into relief the mechanisms of fantasy and the instability of masculine and feminine positions within it. In a later sequence organized around the painting grid, Artemisia draws Agostino to her terrain – the studio – where he agrees to pose as Holofernes. The scale of the figures, depicted

Fig. 4
Subject of vision...



Fig. 5
...and object of representation.



at close range, does not necessitate the perspectival instrument. Its presence in the scene is a productive misreading: the grid effectively reconstructs Gentileschi's most famous painting (figure 3). The theme of Judith and Holofernes refers to the murder of the Assyrian general Holofernes at the hands of Judith, a Jewish widow who, bent on saving her people from impending massacre, ensnares Holofernes and beheads him in his own tent. As Roland Barthes has noted, the biblical story of Judith and Holofernes offers a *récit fort* (a story which offers at the same time 'a good structural performance' and a 'sensual and/or moral emotion') and also an 'available structure' in which the events remain the same, but the characters' psychological determinations change. The theme has been inflected differently in each of its different figurations (drama, poetry, novels, opera or figurative paintings) while preserving a common background: the ambivalence of the link, both erotic and deathly, which brings together Judith and Holofernes. What makes

41 Roland Barthes, 'Deux femmes: sur le tableau d'Artemisia Gentileschi: *Judith et Holopherne*' (1979), in Éric Marty (ed.), *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III 1974–1980 (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 1052 (my translation).

42 Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 135.

painting different from other forms of narrative art is that 'since the *before* and *after* of the narrative event are not figured, meaning remains suspended among several possibilities'.⁴¹

By using a period artefact as a second frame within the film shot, the mise-en-scene forms a painterly *tableau vivant* that injects the ambiguity between Eros and Thanatos into Artemisia's and Agostino's doomed relationship. The film provides the 'before' and 'after' missing from the painting's narrative, yet the tableau does not produce a 'moment of truth'. Instead, the tableau provides the stage of fantasy, with Artemisia consciously role-playing and unconsciously rewriting Judith's story: occupying an outside 'spectatorial' position one moment, joining Agostino on the side of the spectacle the next (figures 4 and 5). This inside/outsideness of the feminine gaze produces the moment of double consciousness in the feminist biopic: of being within and outside history, performing as both reenactment and rewriting. As Elizabeth Cowie has argued, fantasy is a true mise-en-scene of desire that

always involves multiple points of entry which are also mutually exclusive positions, but these are taken up not sequentially – as in a narrative – but simultaneously or rather, since the unconscious does not know time in this way, to take up any position is also always to be implicated in the position of the other(s).⁴²

The 'tableau moment' goes beyond illustration: it discloses the imaginary theatre of fantasy that underlies the realist representation, in which the feminist gesture of appropriation passes through the woman's objectification by the romance narrative. The film text presents framing and posing not as opposites that exclude each other, but as performative positions in the fantasy of female empowerment. Artemisia holds an active gaze in control of the framed image, but the double framing of the shot puts her into the position of both subject and object of desire. The biopic thus reinstates the pleasure of the feminine gaze *in control* over the scene of her own objectification.

In this scene, the film image emerges as a textured space that is both readable and reflexive, inscribing the double consciousness of the biopic: its layering of the present over the past, of the fresh look at bodies in movement over the codes of historical representation. However, the past also *deconstructs the present*, showing that the implications of the romance narrative are part and parcel of the pleasures of an active female gaze. The sequence stages the tension between historical constructions of femininity and the ambiguous claim for visual pleasure that transcends such constructions. However, this scenario of fantasy is subject to the return of the historical as that which determines the textual limits of revision. The film is ultimately a productive feminist rewriting because of its vanishing point into 'the Real': it affirms the heroine's access to knowledge at the expense of the self-containment of the fantasy, which would entail full disengagement from the difficulties of the historical intertext. The historical returns as symptom in the final scene of

Fig. 6
The artist's final (self-)portrait.



Agostino's trial, in which the rational and universal principles of perspective are revealed to be instrumental in what is portrayed as an ideologically corrupt system. My point is that Merlet's film does not cancel the possibility of an 'ethics of reading' (as proposed by Pollock) by denying the rape, as critics like Garrard have argued, but rather displaces the textualization of trauma into the trial scene, in which Artemisia's fingers are mutilated as punishment for her silence. Artemisia's rape takes place at the hands of the patriarchal legal system, producing the piercing of fantasy's protective shield. Shocked by the discovery of Agostino's past sexual offences, Artemisia's silence at the trial contrasts vividly with her 'historical' eloquence, as registered in the trial transcripts and noted by art historians. Whereas the historical Artemisia constructed by academic discourse openly and heroically accuses Tassi of deceit and rape, the 'contemporary' Artemisia of the romance film addresses the spectator through her refusal to reinforce her role as victim, and her resistance to being sold into marriage as reparation for her father's honour.

The film asserts the possibility of a feminist intervention as a necessarily delayed moment, constructed in the distance that mediates between seeing and knowing, between the historical text and its contemporary rewriting. This is the distance textualized in the disjunction between gaze, body and voice. In the closing scene, Artemisia goes back to the seashore and sets up Agostino's grid, while repeating word by word his description of the two-hill view from his jail cell (in which the window bars produce a perfect visual analogy of the perspectival grid). Yet the landscape she (and the spectator) sees does not correspond with this description, but is in fact closer to the seascape of water, sunlight and sky which Agostino created in her mind in his first lesson in perspective. This final scene suggests that, even if the film favours romance over history, Artemisia has now gained the necessary 'perspective' actually to see with eyes wide open the carefully contrived

illusion produced by the grid. This is a landscape of memory, not reality, a landscape not seen, but interpreted through time.

The intersection of cinema and painting is instrumental in the reconstruction of feminine identity through the historical scene as reimagined (and rearranged) by the romance narrative. In this regard, the displaced feminist consciousness – woman as historical subject – is overwritten by the textual identification of the woman artist with the artist-as-filmmaker. *Artemisia* ends with a shot of the protagonist in mourning – mourning for the loss of her father, her lover and, especially, for the necessary loss of innocence that precedes experience. In the closing sequence, *Artemisia* is also double framed for the last time by the perspectival grid, against which she presses her wounded hands. Her fingers, still bandaged, form a triangular frame that asserts ‘her’ vision within the bigger frames of the grid and the shot (figure 6). This ending constitutes a perfect ‘portrait’ moment: the long take allows the camera to slowly zoom in on the woman’s eyes, asserting her power and individuality through the phantasmatic support of the technologies of vision. In spite of the density of the mise-en-scene, the film finally opts for a linear model of narrative that ensures the ‘fixity’ of the classical portrait. In this configuration, the woman artist emerges as a historical figure in possession of the knowledge and self-expression of (post)modern femininity. This is the woman artist as self-portrait – an entirely anachronistic (and utopian) gesture reinforced by *Artemisia*’s literal gesture with her hands, reminiscent of a symbol of 1970s feminism.⁴³ In these closing images, the double framing of the shot becomes instrumental in the inscription of the double consciousness that aligns the distant heroine’s eye with a feminist contemporary eye – ultimately, the filmmaker’s eye.

Artemisia moves with extreme fluidity between image as cultural memory and image as fantasy. In this configuration, visual and narrative pleasure are of crucial importance in the constitution of a specifically feminine position in the text that is the product of fantasy, but which can be reinscribed historically through a critical account of spectatorship. At the same time, *Artemisia* leads the (1970s) feminist critical tradition into an impasse. Its (masochistic) romance narrative dwells on themes of seduction and abandonment, which can be interpreted as a self-defeating deconstruction of the liberal model. The film unfolds as a fantasy scenario that spectacularizes woman’s body and reenacts past traumas. In the process, the film adds one more layer to the portrait: thus, *Artemisia* Gentileschi, the so-called ‘female hero’ of Renaissance painting according to feminist academic discourses, becomes simply ‘*Artemisia*’, a stolen portrait of the artist as a young woman.

In conclusion, the biopic can be redefined as a flexible *fictional* discourse. Divided between the desire for historical fidelity and the necessary reframing of inherited cultural narratives, it makes room for questions about the engendering of knowledge structures in history and

43 I thank Wilma Boisnard for pointing this out to me.

art. Within the conventional frame of romance, the woman artist's biopic produces a narrative space poised between reconstruction and anachronism, blurring the boundary between the two. Its textual work makes room for variation through a reflexive aesthetics that disrupts the realism of the period film, revealing the interstitial workings of fantasy and desire. Seen in this light, the processes of rewriting in the feminist biopic tell us not so much about possible ways of thinking the woman artist historically as about the historical as imagined stage for the struggle to access self-representation. To find alternative ways of understanding the biopic's relation to history, it is therefore necessary to turn to other discourses less concerned with the hierarchies of fidelity and more with the dynamics of popular culture, so that we can read *back* into contemporary cinema the terms of its own feminist project.

Béla Balázs, *Visible Man, or the Culture of Film* (1924)

INTRODUCTION: ERICA CARTER

TRANSLATION: RODNEY LIVINGSTONE

In 1924, the Hungarian critic Béla Balázs published, in German, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films/Visible Man, or the Culture of Film*. Two years later, the Berlin-based critic and journal editor Andor Kraszna-Krausz wrote that ‘the original appearance of Balázs’s volume triggered an international press success of a kind seldom witnessed among contributions to aesthetic philosophy’. Despite occasional contention – Siegfried Kracauer for one, while welcoming Balázs’s formulation of film’s ‘inner aesthetic’, had chastised the author for his undialectical political conclusions¹ – Kraszna-Krausz also ventured the prediction that *Visible Man* would ‘rank in future among the most valuable documents in film history’.²

Kraszna-Krausz’s review was to an extent prophetic. Certainly, Balázs is routinely acknowledged alongside Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer as a central figure in film theory of the classical period from the 1920s to the early postwar years. Yet it is not primarily on early works like *Visible Man* that Balázs’s reputation rests. Despite widespread acknowledgement by Balázs’s contemporaries that his prewar German-language works were the first significant contributions to a ‘dramaturgy’ of film, reception of his work in the English-speaking world has remained dependent on his *Theory of the Film*, a 1952 translation (from the Hungarian) of Balázs’s 1948 *Filmkultúra: A film művészetfilozófiájá*. The Hungarian volume integrates and synthesizes passages from all three of Balázs’s previous substantial film-theoretical works – alongside sections from *Visible Man*, it draws on his *Der Geist des Films/Spirit of Film* (1930) and on large portions of the Russian

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Bücher vom Film,’ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, no. 505, 10 July 1927. Reproduced in Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (1924) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 171.

² Andor Kraszna-Krausz, ‘Béla Balázs: Der sichtbare Mensch. Eine Filmdramaturgie,’ *Filmtechnik*, no. 21, 16 October 1926. Reproduced in Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 168.

- 3 See Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, and *Der Geist des Films* (1930) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001). For a comprehensive survey of Balázs's literary production, see Hanno Loewy, *Béla Balázs: Märchen, Ritual und Film* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2003).

- 4 Sabine Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907–1933* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 214.

- 5 A full translation of *Visible Man* will be published in Berghahn's *Film Europe* series in 2007.

Isskustvo Kino/The Art of Film (1945). Yet it loses in the process much of the scintillating textual detail and polemical verve of the earlier works which had set theoretical discussion in the context of contemporary cinema and film: shifts in actorly performance engendered in film by the new interrelation of camera and the gestural body; or the transformations in acoustic perception that Balázs saw as arising from the transition from silent film to sound.³ Missing, too, are many of the social-theoretical speculations that situate Balázs's work, however contentiously, as an engaged contribution to a politics of mass-cultural modernity in the turbulent Europe of the late interwar period.

The absence of full translations of Balázs's early works has produced an imbalance in his anglophone reception, in particular a tendency, as Sabine Hake points out, to read as a 'closed system of thought' works that are in fact the product of the 'specific historical conditions' of the late 1920s and early 1930s – a period which saw the coming of age of silent cinema, the artistic and commercial crisis triggered by the advent of sound, and the conditions of political emergency experienced by Balázs's generation of critical intellectuals in the face of European fascism and the rise of the Third Reich.⁴ The extracts from *Visible Man* translated here represent the first stage of an attempt to retrieve, for anglophone readers, the historical traces not only of a Balázs committed to the theoretical project of a new aesthetics of film, but also of a critic embroiled in the evolving film politics and creative practices of his time.⁵ As Hake again points out, Balázs's biography is emblematic for an entire generation of European intellectuals, many of them Jewish, whose personal and intellectual life trajectories were shaped not only by war and political turmoil but also by the rapid cultural transformations and intellectual and artistic ferment of Central Europe between the wars.

Born Herbert Bauer in Szeged, Hungary, in 1884, Balázs assumed his future pen name at the age of sixteen, honed his literary skills by writing poetry, and won a scholarship in 1902 to the prestigious Eötvös College in Budapest. Balázs began collaborations here with, among others, Béla Bartók and Georg Lukács, attended seminars under Georg Simmel during a study tour in Berlin, and pursued a career as poet, critic and dramatist alongside his doctoral studies in aesthetics, philosophy and the German literary tradition. His political involvement with the Hungarian Left during this period culminated in participation, alongside Lukács, in the socialist revolution of March 1919, then exile in Vienna following the collapse of the short-lived Commune the following month.

It was in Vienna after 1921 that Balázs first turned his hand to writing about film. Alongside translations into German of his own earlier literary works, he started writing scripts, and then became a regular and prolific film reviewer for the Austrian daily *Der Tag*. The two hundred or so reviews he is estimated to have penned in that period provided Balázs with material grounding for what was to become his landmark contribution to early film theory, *Visible Man*. Opening with a triple 'address by way of a preface' to the three constituencies – aesthetic

philosophers, film directors and cinema audiences – that he wishes to persuade of the value of a theory for film art, Balázs proceeds, in the course of this ninety-page treatise, to stake his claim for film as an art that may restore to modernity the lost expressive capacities of the visual body – ‘visible man’. That plea, moreover, is in no sense limited to the (admittedly invigorating) polemic of the book’s opening. In a lengthy section, *Sketches for a Theory of Film*, Balázs lists the constituent elements of his proposed film dramaturgy. Under such headings as ‘Type and physiognomy’, ‘The play of facial expressions’, ‘The closeup’, ‘The face of things’ and ‘Nature and naturalness’, Balázs presents a typology of expressive elements which together comprise what he proposes is the ‘only shared universal language’, the image-language of film. Sections from Balázs’s introduction, together with extracts from his theoretical sketches on performance, the closeup and montage are reproduced in translation below.

This translation project has a purpose beyond a simple rehistoricization of Balázs’s theory of film. In a recent contribution to *Screen*, Annette Kuhn draws historical parallels between the theoretical enterprise of contemporary film analysts – herself included – who seek to understand the significance of new media technologies and forms and those twentieth-century theorists who grappled similarly with film as a medium ‘as groundbreaking and excitingly novel as today’s new media are for us’.⁶ Kuhn’s recourse is to André Bazin, whose writings on the cinematographic organization of space within the frame (joined here by Kuhn to psychoanalytic accounts of the cinematic experience) are drawn upon to open perspectives on cinema as an intermediate zone between inner and outer worlds, and as a medium capable therefore of ‘replaying or re-evoking certain states of being which are commonly experienced as inner’.⁷

Comparable arguments to Kuhn’s can be made for revisiting the Balázs of *Visible Man*. In addressing questions around spectatorship and popular reception, Balázs’s project also has relevance for contemporary studies of the screen image. His observations on film’s capacity to ‘inspire and give shape’ to ‘the imagination and the emotional life of the people’ touch on issues of popular spectatorship that have been a key focus of attention in film studies since the 1980s.⁸ What Balázs shares with Bazin is an approach to the film experience through aesthetic philosophy; indeed his first preface offers a spirited defence of a ‘philosophy of the art of film’ that should explore questions of film meaning via an account of the medium’s distinctive aesthetic. Kuhn points to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as the source for Bazin’s exploration of the cinematographic processes – focus, framing, light, and so on – that establish the parameters for film’s particular organization of the spectator’s experience of ‘being’ in space and time.⁹ While Balázs’s interest is similarly in the phenomenological organization of experience (the influence of phenomenology is evident, for instance, in his concern with film as an art of the surface image – *Flächenkunst*), both his object

6 Annette Kuhn, ‘Thresholds: film as film and the aesthetic experience’, *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2005), p. 404.

7 Ibid., p. 407.

8 Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 10.

9 Kuhn, ‘Thresholds’, p. 405.

and his philosophical sources are different from Bazin's. Since his preoccupation in *Visible Man* is not centrally with mise-en-scene, but with what he sees as the cultural resurgence of the sensual body through the silent moving image, Balázs turns in the first instance to Romantic accounts of the body in nature, reshaped here for a new account of the 'physiognomy' of the film image.

In a key passage, Balázs maintains that 'Culture appears to be taking the road from the abstract mind to the visible body. . . . Conscious knowledge turns into instinctive sensibility: *it is materialized as culture in the body*' (Balázs's emphasis). Balázs's obscure terminology, and in particular his apparent privileging of 'instinct' over culture, have led many later readers (while acknowledging the significance of his analyses of actorly performance or the face in closeup), to dismiss as 'mystical', 'outdated' or 'essentialist' what is assumed to be an account of the film image as physiognomic window to an inner spirit or soul. There is some validity to the charge of essentialism, but it is important also to draw out the ambivalence in Balázs's account of the physiognomy of the film image. While on the one hand such terms as 'visible spirit' suggest an essential equivalence between face and 'soul', image and essence, Balázs elsewhere is at pains to stress film's 'physiognomy' as the product of a specific *relationship* between inner and outer worlds. Thus in the essay on Asta Nielsen that concludes *Visible Man*, what is highlighted is not the status of her face or body as unmediated expression of inner life, but rather the process of production of meaning and affect in which Nielsen is engaged as she actively mobilizes an 'extensive vocabulary' of gesture and expression to create a screen presence.

For Balázs, Nielsen is thus in every respect a 'consummate artist' who deploys her body actively as an expressive vehicle and thereby 'converts her life into art'. It is, moreover, not only in relation to performance that Balázs locates the film image as a point of synthesis in a dialectic between inner and outer worlds. In his third preface, Balázs's plea to the film audience is for a contemplative reception mode (he calls it 'thoughtful savouring') that will open the body of the spectator to a collective perception of the aesthetic values which inhere in the film image ('I want', he writes, 'to stimulate your senses and nerves'). Here too, the film image becomes the meeting point of a social process whose products are the meanings, the affects and the values that accrue around film: for 'more than any art', Balázs finally stresses, 'film is a social art. Every other art is shaped in its essentials by the artist's tastes and talent. In the case of film, the audience's taste and talent will be the decisive factors. Your great mission lies in this collaboration.'¹⁰

Balázs's enthusiasm for the visual body as the repository of a potentially transformative popular experience was not shared by all his contemporaries on the Weimar cultural Left. Kracauer's critique of Balázs, for instance, rested on his own perception that the socially emblematic body in cinematic representation was not the lived body in cinematic performance but the abstract body of the chorus line or the

¹⁰ Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, pp. 14–15.

11 See Erica Carter, *Dietrich's Ghosts: the Sublime and the Beautiful in Third Reich Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), pp. 67, 94–5 and *passim*. It should be noted that Balázs explicitly names the universal body as white, European and male, and indeed celebrates film's capacity to create the 'unique, shared psyche of the ... white race': see Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 22.

12 Jan Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life: Durations of the Unconscious Self* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 9. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York, NY: Zone, 1988). Hanno Loewy provides a lengthy contextualization of Balázs in relation to Simmel and Bergson, and cites as an example of Balázs's early preoccupation with the phenomenology of time his *Dialogus a dialógusról/ Dialogue on Dialogue* (Budapest: Athenäum, 1913), pp. 62–74, 108–97.

13 *Bilderführung* literally means 'image direction', but actually refers to montage. Given Balázs's opposition to theories of montage as developed by Eisenstein, we have chosen here to translate *Bilderführung* as 'visual linkage'. This retains the original emphasis both on the single shot that is contained in the word *Bild*, and on the continuity between shots. 'Linkage' has the added benefit of an association with Pudovkin, who is said to have been influenced by Balázs.

regimented mass ornament – symbolic formations that literalized the rationalization process of advanced capitalism and were in this sense the more authentic representations of modern experience. While Kracauer might have been correct in identifying *Visible Man*'s weakness as social theory (and Kracauer was certainly vindicated in his political distrust of Balázs when the latter's work was later reclaimed for the racialized film aesthetics of the Third Reich),¹¹ Balázs nonetheless stands out among his contemporaries as a consummate analyst of actorly performance. In the extracts below, we focus on Balázs's accounts of the body, acting and performance that highlight his perspicacity as an observer of the minute expressive shifts through which screen actors generate collective engagement with film art.

Our second selection is from sections of *Visible Man* that locate the visual body temporally within what Balázs identifies as cinema's living flow of moving images. Early studies under Georg Simmel, and his knowledge of Simmel's critical engagement with Henri Bergson, had alerted Balázs to a vitalist phenomenological tradition centring on understandings of the body as a site of multiple flows of sensation, meaning and affect. As Jan Campbell has explained, consciousness was understood in this tradition – which Deleuze was to term 'transcendental empiricism' – as arising out of flows of affect, and an intersubjective play of difference across lived bodies in time and space. The influence of the vitalist argument for 'being as time, which is a constant flux of creativity, difference and becoming' was already evident in Balázs's early essays.¹² In *Visible Man*, a similar preoccupation with the body in time surfaces in Balázs's observations on montage, tempo and rhythm. Unlike Eisenstein, whose 'montage of attractions' he would later publicly criticize, Balázs favoured an understanding of editing as linkage and continuity, not collision – as evidenced in his choice of the idiosyncratic term *Bilderführung* (visual linkage) for his discussions of montage in *Visible Man*.¹³ Balázs's description of linkage, moreover, as the 'living breath' of cinema situates the body image that is this book's central focus as a site of precisely those intersubjective flows of affect and experience with which not only twentieth-century vitalism, but also twenty-first-century film phenomenology, is centrally concerned. A closer investigation of the phenomenology of film as it developed in the early silent era is thus timely, and it is in that spirit that extracts from the early German work of Balázs are presented overleaf.

Visible Man

The discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible. People have been able to glean so much from reading that they could afford to neglect other forms of communication.

Victor Hugo once wrote that the printed book has taken over the role of mediaeval cathedrals and has become the repository of the spirit of the people. But the thousands of books fragmented the single spirit of the cathedrals into a myriad different opinions. The printed word smashed the stone to smithereens and broke up the church into a thousand books.

In this way, the *visible spirit* was transformed into a legible spirit, and a *visual culture* was changed into a conceptual one. . . . Since the advent of printing the word has become the principal bridge joining human beings to one another. The soul has migrated into the word and become crystallized there. The body, however, has been stripped of soul and emptied.

The expressive surface of our bodies has been reduced to just our face. This is not simply because we cover the other parts of our bodies with clothes. Our face has now come to resemble a clumsy little semaphore of the soul, sticking up in the air and signalling as best it may. Sometimes, our hands help out a little, evoking the melancholy of mutilated limbs. The back of a headless Greek torso always reveals whether the lost face was laughing or weeping – we can still see this clearly. Venus's hips smile as expressively as her face, and casting a veil over her head would not be enough to stop us from guessing her thoughts and feelings. For in those days man was visible in his entire body. In a culture dominated by words, however, now that the soul has become audible, it has grown almost invisible. This is what the printing press has done.

Well, the situation now is that once again our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. Every evening many millions of people sit and experience human destinies, characters, feelings and moods of every kind with their eyes, and without the need for words. For the intertitles that films still have are insignificant; they are partly the ephemeral rudiments of as yet undeveloped forms, and partly they bear a special meaning that does not set out to assist the visual expression. The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words characteristic of sign language for the deaf-and-dumb, but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. *Man will become visible once again.*

Modern philologists and historians of language have established that the origins of language are to be found in *expressive movements*. By this we mean that when man began to speak he began like a child, by moving

his tongue and lips in the same way as his hands and his facial muscles; in other words, uttering sounds was not his original intention. Initially, the movements of his tongue and lips were no more than spontaneous gestures, on a par with other bodily gestures. The fact that he uttered sounds at the same time was a secondary phenomenon, one subsequently exploited for practical purposes. The immediately visible spirit was then transformed into a mediated audible spirit and much was lost in the process, as in all translation. But the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind.

We are beginning to recall this language and are poised to learn it anew. As yet, it is still clumsy and primitive, and far from able to rival the subtleties of modern verbal art. But because its roots in human nature are older and deeper than the spoken language, and because it is nevertheless fundamentally new, its stammerings and stutterings often articulate ideas that the artists of the word strive in vain to express.

... The culture of words is dematerialized, abstract and over-intellectualized; it degrades the human body to the status of a biological organism. But the new language of gestures that is emerging at present arises from our painful yearning to be human beings with our entire bodies, from top to toe and not merely in our speech. We long to stop dragging our body around like an alien thing that is useful only as a practical set of tools. This new language arises from our yearning for the *embodied* human being who has fallen silent, who has been forgotten and has become invisible. ...

(T)oday this visual man is in an in-between state: no longer there and not yet present. It is a law of nature that any organ that falls into disuse degenerates and atrophies. In the culture of words our bodies were not fully used and have lost their expressiveness in consequence. ... Culture does not just refer to the beautiful poses of statues in the art galleries, but to the gait and the everyday gestures of people in the street or at their work. Culture means the penetration of the ordinary material of life by the human spirit, and a visual culture would have to find new and different forms with which to express people's behaviour in their daily intercourse with one another. The art of dance cannot do this; it is a task that will be accomplished by film. ...

In general, culture appears to be taking the road from the abstract mind to the visible body. ... Conscious knowledge turns into instinctive sensibility: *it is materialized as culture in the body*. The body's expressiveness is always the latest product of a cultural process. This means that however primitive and barbarous the film may be in comparison to *modern* literature, it nevertheless represents the cultural mainstream because it incorporates the direct transformation of spirit into body.

This path leads in two apparently opposite directions. At first glance, it appears as if the language of physiognomy could only increase and intensify the process of estrangement and alienation that started with the confusion of tongues in the Tower of Babel. This cultural path seemed to

point towards the isolation of the individual, to loneliness. For after all, following the confusion of tongues in Babel, communities still survived who acquired the words and concepts of their common mother tongue, and a shared dictionary and grammar rescued human beings from the ultimate solitariness of mutual incomprehension. However, the language of gestures is far more individual and personal than the language of words. Admittedly, facial expressions have their own vocabulary of 'conventional' standard forms, so much so that we could and indeed should compile a comparative dictionary of these expressions on the model of comparative linguistics. However, although this language of gestures has its traditions, it is unlike grammar in that it lacks strict rules, whose neglect would be severely punished in school. This language is still so young that it can be smoothly moulded to fit the particular nature of each individual. It is still at the stage where it can be created by the mind, rather than mind being created by it.

On the other hand, the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel. The screens of the entire world are now starting to project the *first international language* ... the language of gestures which has become standardized in film.

...

Sketches for a theory of film

...

Linguistic gesture and the language of gestures

Can we interpret expressive movement and the visual in general as the special province of film? After all, the stage actor also speaks with his whole body and stage decor likewise exists to be looked at.

But the facial expressions and other gestures of a speaking actor are different. They express only what is left over. *Whatever has to be said*, but will not go into words, is added with the aid of the actor's facial muscles and hands.

In film, however, the play of facial expressions is not an optional extra, and this distinction means not only that gestures in film are more explicit and detailed, but that they operate on an entirely different plane. For the speaker brings to light a different stratum of the soul from the one evoked by, say, the musician or dancer. Dependent as he is on language, the gestures that accompany his words spring from the same source as them. Optically, they may seem similar to a dancer's, but they are informed by a different spirit. A speaker's gestures have the same emotional content as his words, for the dimensions of the soul cannot be mixed. It is merely that they refer to words as yet unborn.

A dancer's gestures, however, have their origins elsewhere and they have a different meaning. They are the characteristic expression of a characteristic human being and hence the characteristic material of a characteristic form of art. They are as unrelated to the gestures of a speaker as they are to his words.

I would like to clarify this with an illustration. Every language has a musical component and every word its own melody. But the music of language, although similar acoustically to actual music, possesses no inner musicality. It has the atmosphere of concepts and helps to enhance the process of rational discrimination. However, music is not just an acoustic matter; it is a separate sphere of the soul. And indeed, facial expressions and gestures are themselves no mere optical matter.

I was speaking of dancers. But the film actor does not dance. Nevertheless, he is not dependent on words and plays no part in the rational world of concepts. There appears to be a third realm between the speaker's world of gestures and the decorative expressive movements of the dancer, and this realm has its own form of interiority. The *gestural language* of film is as far removed from the *linguistic gestures* of theatre as it is from dance.

...

The play of facial expressions

There was once a French film in which Suzanne Desprès played the lead even though she made no contribution to the 'plot'. The film went like this. In a short overture we see a beggar woman sitting with her dying child, beseeching fate to take pity. Death appears and tells the mother: 'I shall show you the predestined life of your child. Watch it and if you still want her to live, then so be it.' Then the actual film unfolds, the fate of the child a mundane, insignificant story. But the mother, Suzanne Desprès, watches. In the left-hand corner of the film we see her face as she is watching the film, like us, accompanying the adventures of her child with the play of her facial expressions. We watch for an hour and a half as hope, fear, joy, emotion, sadness, courage, the white heat of conviction and the blackness of despair pass across her face. The film's real drama, its essential content, is played out on her face. The 'story' was only the pretext.

... Gaumont knew what it was doing to pay Suzanne Desprès such a high fee for her role. For the public and the film business had already discovered something that our aesthetes and literati have not yet noticed. This is that *what matters in film is not the storyline but the lyrical*.

The narrative of feelings

The play of expressions expresses feelings; in other words it is lyrical. It is a form of lyricism that is incomparably richer and fuller of nuance than literary works of whatever kind. Facial expressions are vastly more numerous than words! And looks can express every shade of emotion far more precisely than a description! And how much more personal is the expression of a face than words that others too may use! And how much more concrete and unambiguous is physiognomy than concepts, which are always abstract and general!

It is here that we see the poetry of film at its most authentic and profound. A person who judges a film by its storyline seems to me to

resemble someone who says of a love poem: 'What's so special about this poem? She is beautiful and he loves her!' Films, however wonderful, frequently have little more to say. But they say it in a way that poetry cannot match.

There are two particular reasons for this. One is that the meaning of words is in part more time-bound than facial expressions; the other is that since words are uttered in sequence, no simultaneous harmony, no meaningful chords, can arise. I shall explain this further.

There is a film in which Asta Nielsen is looking out of the window and sees someone coming. A mortal fear, a petrified horror, appears on her face. But she gradually realizes that she is mistaken and that the man who is approaching, far from spelling disaster, is the answer to her prayers. The expression of horror on her face is gradually modulated through the entire scale of feelings from hesitant doubt, anxious hope and cautious joy, right through to exultant happiness. We watch her face in closeup for some twenty metres of film. We see every hint of expression around her eyes and mouth and watch them relax one by one and slowly change. For minutes on end we witness the organic *development of her feelings*, and nothing beyond.

Such an emotional development cannot be depicted in words, however poetic. Every word signifies a separate stage, a process that gives rise to a staccato of isolated snapshots of the feelings. The fact is that one word has to have come to an end before another one can begin. *But a facial expression need not have been completed before another one starts to infiltrate it* and gradually displace it entirely. In the *legato* of visual continuity, past and future expressions merge into one another and display not just the individual states of the soul but also the mysterious process of development itself. This narrative of the feelings enables film to give us something unique.

The chords of the emotions

In general, facial expressions are more 'polyphonic' than language. The succession of words resembles the successive notes of a melody. But a face can display the most varied emotions *simultaneously*, like a chord, and the relationships between these different emotions is what creates the rich amalgam of harmonies and modulations. These are the chords of feeling whose essence is in fact their simultaneity. Such simultaneity cannot be expressed in words.

Pola Negri once acted Carmen.¹⁴ She flirted with the truculent José and her face expressed joy and submissiveness at the same time, since she finds some pleasure in having to humble herself a little. But at the moment when José falls at her feet and she sees his weakness and helplessness, the look on her face becomes *superior* and *sad* at the same time. Moreover, she really has just one look in which these different elements cannot be separated out; each expression rubs off on the other. It points to the painful disappointment she feels at realizing that she is the stronger. The woman has lost the battle because she has emerged as

¹⁴ *Carmen/Gypsy Blood* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1918) was a film version not of Bizet's opera but of the story by Prosper Mérimée that had inspired it. This and all following notes are the translator's.

victor. But by formulating what happens in words, we just cause a *single* expression to crumble. And as soon as we begin to speak, we somehow say something different.

...

The tempo of emotions

In *Way Down East*,¹⁵ Lilian Gish plays a trusting girl who has been seduced. When the man tells her that he has deceived her and made a fool of her, she cannot believe her ears. She knows what he says is true, but wants to believe that he is just joking. And for five whole minutes she laughs and cries by turns, at least a dozen times.

We would need many printed pages to describe the storms that pass over this tiny, pale face. Reading them would also take up much time. But the nature of these feelings lies precisely in the crazy rapidity with which they succeed one another. The effect of this play of facial expressions lies in *its ability to replicate the original tempo of her emotions*.

That is something that words are incapable of. The description of a feeling always lasts longer than the time taken by the feeling itself. The rhythm of our inner turbulence will inevitably be lost in every literary narrative.

The visible possibilities and the morality of physiognomy

In *Fortune's Fool*,¹⁶ Emil Jannings plays the part of the worst kind of profiteer. Every gesture, every facial expression shows him to be a bloodsucker, a remorseless shark. And yet! Somehow or other he remains a sympathetic character. There is something about his face that we cannot help liking. It is his naivety, something childlike, that persists as a covert decency *at the same time* as his dirty looks. It makes us believe that he is capable of kindness. At the end of the film, this better self becomes visible. But the fact that we can see these signs of goodness from the very outset even in his nastiest expressions is a miracle of polyphonic physiognomy.

A good film actor never presents us with surprises. Since film permits of no psychological explanations, the possibility of a change in personality must be plainly written in an actor's face from the outset. What is exciting is to discover a hidden quality, in the corner of the mouth, for example, and to see how from this germ the entire new human being grows and spreads over his entire face. Hebbel's remark, 'Whatever a man is capable of becoming, he already is', can and indeed must become physiognomical reality in the cinema.

The fact that a deeper face is both visible and hidden also provides a clue to the moral significance of physiognomy. For even in film a simple distinction between good people and bad is not enough. In literature the hidden moral qualities of a man can only be shown by loosening his mask or removing it altogether. What we find moving and also exciting in physiognomy, however, is its simultaneity, the fact that it is possible to discover goodness in the very expression of evil. Many a face surprises us with a deeper look, as if gazing out at us through the eyes of a mask.

¹⁵ *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920).

¹⁶ Also known as *Alles für Geld/All for Money* (Reinhold Schünzel, 1923).

- 17 *Die Tragödie der Liebe/The Tragedy of Love* (Joe May, 1923), featured Emil Jannings and, in a lesser role, Marlene Dietrich.

There are many opportunities for producing tension in all this. A man may be depicted as a rogue and a scoundrel in all his actions. But his face tells us that it cannot be him. This contradiction creates a dilemma for the audience and we impatiently await its resolution. It endows a character with the vitality that only such an enigma can create.

The drama of facial expressions

The play of facial expressions in film is not just lyrical in its function. There are also ways of depicting the external action in purely physiognomic terms. Admittedly, this is a pinnacle that is only rarely attained in the cinema today. I shall give an example. A film by Joe May, *Die Tragödie der Liebe*,¹⁷ contains a regular physiognomical duel. The examining magistrate sits across the bench from the accused. We do not learn what they say to each other. But both dissemble and disguise their true face behind expressions they have assumed. Each tries to discover what lies behind the other's mask. And by using their facial expressions to attack each other and to defend themselves, each strives to provoke his interlocutor into giving himself away by assuming a treacherous expression (just as one might try to induce someone to say more than he intends).

Such a duel of facial expressions is much more exciting than a verbal duel. A statement can be retracted or reinterpreted, but no statement is as utterly revealing as a facial expression.

In a truly artistic film the dramatic climax between two people will always be shown as a dialogue of facial expressions in closeup.

Closeup

I am speaking here of physiognomy and the play of facial expression as if they were a speciality and even a monopoly of film, and yet they also play a pivotal role in the theatre. But it is not to be compared with their importance in film. First, because in the theatre we listen to the words and so (both we and the actors) fail to concentrate on the characters' faces and notice only the crudest, most schematic, expressions. Second, the actor has to speak clearly for our ears and this impairs the spontaneous movements of the mouth and hence of the face as a whole. Third, because on the stage – for obvious technical reasons – we can never observe a face for so long, in such detail and as intensively as in a film closeup.

The closeup is the technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general. A face has to be brought really close to us and it must be isolated from any context that might distract our attention (likewise something that is not possible on the stage); we must be able to dwell on the sight so as to be able to read it properly. The film calls for a subtlety and assurance in depicting facial expressions of which actors who just appear on the stage can only dream. In closeups every wrinkle becomes a crucial element of character and every twitch of a muscle testifies to a pathos that signals great inner events. The closeup of a face is frequently used as the climax of an important scene; it must be the lyrical essence of the entire drama. If the

sudden appearance of such an image is not to appear meaningless, we have to be able to recognize its links with the drama as a whole. The latter will be reflected in its features, just as a small lake reflects all the mountains that surround it. In the theatre, even the most important face is never more than one element in the play. In the film, however, when a face spreads over the entire screen in a closeup, this face becomes 'the whole thing' that contains the entire drama for minutes on end.

...

Closeups are film's true terrain. With the closeup the new territory of this new art opens up. It bears the name: 'The little things of life'. But even the biggest things of life consist of these 'little things', individual details and single moments, while the larger contours are mainly the result of the insensitivity and sloppiness with which we ignore the little things and blur their outlines. The abstract picture of the big things of life arises mainly from our myopia.

But the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail. It shows you what your hand is doing, though normally you take no notice when it strokes someone or hits out at them. You live in it and pay no attention to it. The magnifying glass of the film camera will show you your shadow on the wall, something you live with without noticing, and it will show you the adventures and the ultimate fate of the cigar in your unsuspecting hand, and the secret – because unheeded – life of all the things that accompany you on your way and that taken together make up the events of your life. You have observed life much as a bad musician observes an orchestral piece. He hears only the leading melody and the rest of it merges into a general sound. Through its closeups a good film will teach you to read the score of the polyphony of life, the individual voices of all things which go to make up the great symphony.

In a good film, the decisive moment of the actual storyline is never shown in long shot. For in a long shot you can never see what is really happening. When I see a finger pulling the trigger and after that see the wound breaking open, then I have seen the start and finish of an action, its birth and transformation. Everything that comes between those two events is invisible, like a bullet in flight.

The director guides your gaze

What is specific to film about these closeups? After all, the theatre director could also carefully prepare such individual effects on the stage. The answer lies in the possibility of lifting the single image out of the whole. This not only enables us to see the minute atoms of life more clearly than anything on stage, but in addition the director uses them to guide our gaze. On the stage we always see the total picture in which these small moments dwindle into insignificance. But if they are emphasized, they lose the mood created by their very obscurity. By contrast, in film the director guides our gaze with the aid of closeups and

also follows up the long shot with shots showing the hidden corners in which the mute life of things retains its secret mood.

The closeup in film is the art of emphasis. It is a mute pointing to important and significant detail, while at the same time providing an interpretation of the life depicted. Two films with the same plot, the same acting and the same long shots but with different closeups will express two different views of life.

The naturalism of love

Closeups are a kind of naturalism. They amount to the sharp observation of detail. However, such observation contains an element of tenderness, and I should like to call it the naturalism of love. For what you truly love, you also know well, and you gaze upon its minutest details with fond attentiveness. (Needless to say, there is also a sharp observation driven by hatred that we may likewise call naturalism.) In films with many good closeups you often gain the impression that these shots are not so much the product of a good eye as of a good heart. They radiate warmth, a diffuse lyricism whose particular artistic significance is that it moves us without lapsing into sentimentality. It remains impersonal and objective. A tender feeling towards things is aroused without being made explicit (or described in the usual clichés).

'Inserting' extreme closeups

Over and above the closeup, the tools with which to achieve emphasis include the concentration of lighting, 'effects lighting', and background shots. All of these present a director with the problem of visual linkage. . . . Linkage, in other words the sequence of images and their tempo, corresponds to style in literature. The fact that the same story can be told in very different ways and with different effects depends on the conciseness and the rhythm of the individual sentences. In the same way, linkage will give the film its rhythmic character. It will ensure that the images will flow smoothly and in a broad stream, like the hexameter in a classical epic, or else like a ballad, flaring up breathlessly and then dying down again, like a drama, rising inexorably towards a climax, or tingling capriciously. Linkage is the living breath of film and everything depends on it.

The first problem in linkage arises from the fact that the images cannot be conjugated. We can write, 'The hero *went* home, and when he entered . . .'. But an image exists only in the present and so the film can only show him *going*. Or else nothing at all. And the question is, 'What can and what should we leave out?'

Directors who come to film from the theatre often bring with them the prejudice about 'concentrating on essentials' and the need to 'focus' on large, detailed and crucial set-piece scenes. This means that there is always something of a chilling vacuum in the intervening scenes. The living, warm flow of life congeals into great blocks of ice.

However, the 'essentials' in a film are located elsewhere than on the stage, in a different dimension. The novelist knows full well why he does

not present his story in three great concentrated acts, why he narrates a thousand little ‘incidental’ happenings. It is because he is interested in knitting together the texture of the atmosphere that is always ruptured and destroyed when the meaning of the action is revealed in a spectacular scene. This meaning may be the kernel of the entire work. But a kernel does not produce a fruit’s juice and aroma.

Yet the words a novelist has to use are always clear-cut concepts whose sharp claws scratch an unambiguous meaning from everything, while the purely visual nature of film enables us to see that *indeterminate something* that can only ever appear between the lines even in the best of novelists. A good director will work with a ‘thin flow’ of images linking a number of subsidiary scenes in ways that will always seem surprising and new to us, like snapshots of movements that show us quite unfamiliar positions of the body. But the movement of life itself also consists of such unfamiliar positions (positions of the soul) that are easily obliterated by a focus on ‘essentials’, but that are revealed to us by film for the first time.

Interpolated images

The exclusively present nature of images means that our *experience of time* in a film is an especially problematic aspect of visual linkage. Because the original running time of an action is presented in a visually continuous sequence of images, the only way to ‘let time pass’ is to interrupt the scene by interpolating extra images. But the mere length of such interpolated images is not enough to enable the audience to gauge *how much* time has elapsed.

Length of time is a mood, not an objective fact to be measured by the clock. Whether we feel that one minute has passed or many hours depends on the rhythm of a scene, the space in which it is set and even the way it is lit. There are curious connections between our sense of time and space and they deserve closer psychological investigation. For example, the fact that *the further the location of an interpolated scene is from that of the principal scene, the greater is the illusion that a longer time has elapsed*. If we interrupt a scene in a room with another in the hall, however long the second scene lasts it does not suggest much more time has passed than the time taken by the scene itself. But if the interpolated scene leads us into a different town or even a foreign country, it will arouse the illusion of such a great shift of ‘time-space’ that we shall not find it easy to transport ourselves back into the original scene.

The twin necessities of interpolated scenes on the one hand and visual continuity on the other often appear to present an almost insoluble contradiction and turn visual linkage into the director’s most delicate task. He has to know how to ensure that the mood of one scene continues to illuminate the mood of the following one. Just as the colour in a painting takes on a different hue depending on the colours adjacent to it, so too the mood of one scene will be influenced by the scene that precedes it. An interpolated scene, therefore, may diverge from the main action but must be related to it in mood.

This continuity of mood also helps to maintain the memory of what has gone before and also the general context, thus replacing the need to rely on the expedient of titles. Small motifs, objects, gestures and sometimes just the lighting can all evoke the associations of an earlier scene and, like visual leitmotifs that barely cross the threshold of consciousness, they enable us to grasp the main thrust of the plot.

Passageways

It is necessary here to say something about scenes of passage. These are transitional scenes that show us only how a character moves from one location to another. Many directors, especially those who come to cinema from the theatre, used to be strongly prejudiced against these scenes, regarding them as dead spaces in the film, clumsy expedients.

But passageways contain a film's lyrical element. The hero's solitary comings and goings before and after his great scene are his soliloquies, and in film these are not even 'unnatural'. Thanks to its *ritardando* effect, the hero's progress to the decisive scene can produce a preparatory tension, an atmospheric springboard, and the image of passage following the dramatic climax can present its impact, the emotional result. It can achieve this far more effectively than the climactic scene itself, where the events of the external action often obscure their internal ramifications.

In these performed monologues of walking, an actor can often display his art more fully than in the most turbulent dramatic scenes. The reason is that these latter scenes are full of gestures that have not merely an *inner motive* but also an *external purpose*. Such purposive gestures are not simply expressive in function; they are partly determined by the external action and hence do not provide an actor with the same opportunity to express emotions as an image of passage. When two men walk quietly side by side, their gait will reveal the differences in their characters. If they are fighting, however, even the wildest movements will cease to express the subtle differences of character and mood between them.

I can very well imagine an impressionist cinematic style – I might also term it a Maeterlinckian style – in which the principal scenes are not shown at all, but only the presentiments and lyrical after-effects of the events concerned – moments of passage.

In *The Phantom*,¹⁸ Alfred Abel spends a lot of time wandering alone through the streets. But nowhere else in the film do we see so clearly that here is a lost soul, a deluded man who has gone astray, a man intoxicated by dreams who is doomed to fall into the abyss. In the scenes with other people we can still entertain the belief that the danger comes from them and that he might well be spared. But when he is alone, the way he walks tells us that the danger is in himself. He is inwardly wounded and he staggers around like a man who has been shot. (And in general, the way a protagonist walks expresses the gesture governing his destiny.)

And to see Conrad Veidt's walk! It is hard to imagine a film whose main dramatic scenes could equal the intensity of Veidt's images of passage. The way he walks as the sleepwalking medium in *Caligari* is

¹⁸ *The Phantom/Phantom* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), with Alfred Abel in the lead role, was based on a novel by Gerhart Hauptmann.

like the slow, very slow, flight of an arrow bringing an ineluctable death. And in general, Veidt's gait resembles a spear cleaving the space in front of it and pointing to the direction fate intends to take.

In one film Lilian Gish plays a poor girl looking in vain for work and we see her walking along the street, exhausted and desperate. Every step she takes is like someone shutting her eyes, letting her head droop and falling under the wheels of a car.

Needless to say, passageways must not be treated as being of secondary importance. There are directors who prepare the decisive scenes with great care and ensure that they are played by the very best actors. But once the hero has left the room, the same directors may well ignore the servant who helps him into his coat or the chauffeur who opens the car door for him. Such interpolated scenes are treated as nothing more than dead linking material, as mere glue, and are not 'acted' at all. But such lifeless gaps act like a blast of cold air on the rest of the film; the audience does not notice where the cold comes from, but may feel the chill nonetheless. However, if directors keep a tight rein on even the tiniest scenes they will give the film a *continuity of illusion* that creates an atmospheric warmth that cannot be pinned down and that permeates the film as a whole.

Simultaneism and refrain

Visual linkage in film contains the most varied stylistic possibilities. I should like to refer to just two that I believe will play a special role in modern developments. The first style, one that can already be seen here and there, I should like to call 'simultaneism', after the most modern school of lyric poetry, with Walt Whitman as its most significant representative. For it is based on the same intention, namely the wish to present not merely a single image of the world at large, but a number of *simultaneous* events, even if there is no causal relationship between these events and the principal one, or among these simultaneous events themselves. By means of this cross-section of life as *a whole*, the aim is to create a cosmic impression, an impression of the entire world, since this alone can depict the world in its reality.

Abel Gance made attempts of this sort; he strove to depict not just an action but at the same time its entire context. For example, when we follow the fate of his hero in Paris, the narrative is constantly interrupted by momentary flashes in which we see villages, people working in the fields, or a girl at a window. None of these things is relevant to the plot, but they represent a simultaneous reality. In that reality life is going on as usual and that should not be forgotten.

I believe that the theoretical hopes placed in this style cannot be fulfilled in practice. They give the film *a false dimension*; a dimension of breadth instead of depth. To convey depth film should focus not on the neglected images of remote distances, but on the neglected images of things close to us, the invisible aspects of our own experienced moments. Furthermore, by inserting the action together with a number of motifs into a spatial perspective that evinces no sign of a before and after, such a

simultaneous representation of the surrounding circumstances nullifies all sense of time.

...

Tempo

In general, tempo is one of the most fascinating and important secrets of film. . . . A long take means something different from a short one. The length or brevity of a scene is not just a matter of rhythm, but rather it *determines its meaning*. (A doubtless vain reminder to distributors and cinema proprietors and all those who cut the director's work without his consent.) Every second counts. Just cut a metre of film and the scene – if it was a good one – will not only be shorter but have changed its meaning. It has been given a new mood-content.

Moreover, it often will have become shorter only in terms of physical length; in its mood it will have lengthened. The internal tempo of the images is entirely independent of the time required to show them in reality. There are scenes in which, by showing a large number of minor objects in closeup, the passing of the seconds produces the effect of dramatic tempo. When these details are cut, what remains is a general image that is no more than a lifeless frame. This may well take less time to see but it is not possible to fill such a frame with tension.

We can illustrate this situation with the aid of a simile that is perhaps not quite exact: if I look at the picture of an anthill in closeup, with the detailed images of its teeming activity, such images will have tempo. But if I shorten it by cutting out the closeups so that I am left with the generalized picture of an ant heap, a mere geometrical shape, and the act of cutting will result only in filling the film with internal *longueurs*.

In the cinema every storyline resembles such an ant heap. The closer and more detailed our view, the more life and tempo it has. But when the events are just noted fleetingly, they are drained of all vitality. When an event just flits past, we merely *note its presence* without actually seeing it. It does not come to life before our eyes and has only the meaning of a kind of literature in hieroglyphs. Moreover, on its own even a concept, a word, can have no tempo, and the brief synopsis of a novel will always be more boring than the novel itself.

There are films that produce one interesting scene after another and yet are quite lacking in tension because scarcely have we reached one situation than the film's faulty tempo hustles us on to the next. A protracted duel makes for a more exciting scene than the lightning thrust of a dagger. It seems in general as if *the only thing that produces tempo in a scene is the mobility of the atoms of which it is composed*. This is because the spoken word can always call to mind the plot in its entirety, but it is only the momentary that enables us to *see*.

With thanks to the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation and *Screen* for their generous financial support.

Absorption and theatricality in the cinema: some thoughts on narrative and spectacle

RICHARD RUSHTON

When I wrote an essay on ‘absorption and theatricality’ that was published in *Screen* in 2004, I had hoped it would serve as a way of reconfiguring debates on narrative and spectacle in the cinema.¹ In simple terms, my aim was to refute any notion that the division between narrative and spectacle in the cinema could be mapped onto an opposition between absorption and theatricality. The reason for arguing such a point was precisely to throw the distinction between narrative and spectacle into question, to point out that narrative and spectacle are intertwined in complex ways, so that dividing them as polar opposites is ultimately a reductive and unproductive project for film studies.

Imagine my consternation, then, when an article on ‘absorption and theatricality’ was published in *Screen* in 2005 that completely fell into the ‘trap’ of mapping the distinction between absorption and theatricality onto that of narrative versus spectacle. The author goes so far as to equate absorption with fascism and theatricality with freedom – which is to say, narrative is fascistic while spectacle is liberating and democratic.²

The arguments put forward by that author are hardly new, however. In fact, it is the current hegemony of film studies: narrative is bad; non-narrative is good. Narrative transparency and voyeuristic absorption are bad, and anything that counteracts or breaks down narrative absorption is good. I am quite sure that any recent issue of any major film journal will feature this well-worn binary division of narrative and spectacle. Take, for example, a 2004 issue of *Camera Obscura*, in which one author’s praise for the genre of melodrama stems from its ability to allow viewers

1 Richard Rushton, ‘Early, classical and modern cinema: absorption and theatricality’, *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2004), pp. 226–44.

2 Sarah Wright, ‘Dropping the mask: theatricality and absorption in Sáenz de Heredia’s *Don Juan*’, *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2005), pp. 415–31.

- 3 Lynne Joyrich, 'Written on the screen: mediation and immersion in *Far From Heaven*', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2004).

- 4 Rosalind Galt, 'Back projection: visualizing past and present Europe in *Zentropa*', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2005), pp. 13–14.

- 5 Peter Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Volume II: an Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 500–509. Wollen's article was written in 1972.

- 6 Ibid., p. 509.

to 'see' rather than just 'see through' cinematic form – in other words, viewers of melodrama are not just absorbed into the narratives of such films, but instead can understand the presentation of melodramatic form as spectacle, over and above any intention for narrative absorption.³ Or take, as another example, a recent issue of *Cinema Journal*: here another author affirms the 'visually spectacular' in Lars von Trier's *Zentropa* (1991), inasmuch as this spectacle supersedes its 'narrative use'. As a result of this emphasis on the film's spectacular surface, 'the spectator', the author claims, 'is distanced from the mechanisms of classical narrative absorption'.⁴

Game over: support narrative absorption and you lose; enthusiastically advocate spectacle and you win. The game of film studies has never been easier.

And yet, this winning strategy has been dominant for over thirty years in film studies. Perhaps the clearest exposition of this triumphant dichotomy was the one put forward in a justifiably famous article by Peter Wollen on Jean-Luc Godard's *Vent d'Est* (1972),⁵ in which he divides the winning techniques from the losing ones:

The losing side

Narrative transitivity
Identification
Transparency
Single diegesis
Closure
Pleasure
Fiction

The winning side

Narrative intransitivity
Estrangement
Foregrounding
Multiple diegesis
Aperture
Unpleasure
Reality

To the losing side we can today add narrative absorption, while on the winning side we can add spectacle and theatricality. Plug these terms into any analysis of a film, and Hey presto! any film scholar has a recipe for success.

So am I trying to say here that very little has changed in film studies for over thirty years? Well, no, not exactly. I would prefer to say that film studies has undergone nothing less than a regression over that time, that the solidification of the hegemonic division between narrative and spectacle has reduced film analysis to a plug'n'play model. Wollen, for his part, was infinitely more subtle and sophisticated than today's plug'n'play experts. His defence of Godard finally rested on an admission that Godard's films could only counteract the 'fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices' of the dominant cinema with 'its own antagonistic fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices'.⁶ In other words, spectacle or foregrounding was not an automatic riposte to the absorptions of classical narrative transparency; rather, the relation between them was far more complex than a simple binary division could possibly suggest.

But we cannot avoid another question raising its ugly head: what precisely is so wrong with narrative absorption? Why is narrative

absorption something that is to be avoided at all costs if one is to land on the 'winning' side of film studies? Why are film scholars so fearful of narrative absorption, and why are they so keen to warn others of the dangers of falling under the spell of a narrative?

For the art historian Michael Fried, absorption in the history of art refers to artworks and engagements with works of art that *compel conviction*.⁷ Fried's alarming intervention in art history – made most emphatically in 1967, just as modern art was turning into what most commentators today would call postmodernism – stands against just about everything that today passes for progressive or subversive art.⁸ As Fried's antagonists are only too keen to point out, most of the significant art since 1970 has been made on the basis 'that it *not* compel conviction – that it trouble conviction, that it demystify belief: that it not be what it seems to be'.⁹ Fried's defence of absorption in the history of art is thus horribly out of favour with postmodern types, and I imagine that any defence of absorption in cinema would be met with similar torrents of derision by film scholars. For so-called progressive and postmodern types, in film studies as for art history, today, absorption is the enemy. To be a player on today's intellectual market, any concept that can be marshalled against absorption will do, just so long as absorption is smashed to pieces and sent packing.

Utterly fed up with recent approaches to art theory and to recent art as well, another art historian, an art historian of some distinction, has recently edged towards his own account of absorption. T.J. Clark, in *The Sight of Death*, refers to something he calls 'self-containment', which he parallels with Fried's notion of absorption. In order to explain what self-containment or absorption may mean, Clark rhapsodizes on his belief in what art has the capacity to do:

When I am in front of a picture the thing I want most is to enter the *picture's* world: it is the possibility of doing so that makes pictures worth looking at for me. Though of course the process of looking is egocentric, and I write 'I' all the time, the moment that the looking and writing are always waiting for is that of being *in the picture's place* – within the structure of experience the picture opens up for others to inhabit.¹⁰

I think Clark has stated here something that is deeply profound and magisterially correct. For a film scholar today to utter the same words in defence of an approach to film . . . well, I imagine he or she would be laughed out of the academy. But, so be it: what Clark has said here for painting or pictures is pretty much what I want to say for films. When I am in front of a film the thing I want most is to enter the film's world; it is the possibility of doing so that makes films worth going to for me. Though of course the process of spectatorship is egocentric, dare I say 'transcendental', the moment that the viewing and writing about cinema are always waiting for is that of being *in the film's place* – within the structure of experience the film opens up for others to inhabit.

7 Michael Fried, 'An introduction to my art criticism', in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 43.

8 The key work is Fried's 'Art and objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 148–72. The essay was first published in 1967. Cf. Fried, 'How modernism works: a response to T.J. Clark', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1982), pp. 217–34.

9 Hal Foster, cited by Fried in 'An introduction to my art criticism', p. 43. Cf. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), ch. 2; Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

10 T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: an Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 222.

11 I also approach the narrative/spectacle question in a different context in 'Narrative and spectacle in *Gladiator*', *Cine-Action*, no. 56 (2001), pp. 34–43.

Is that absorption? – to enter the film's world? – to be *in the film's place*? – to enter *another structure of experience*? Yes, I pretty much think that's what absorption is. And I think this is what being absorbed by a film is all about.

I believe it is high time for film scholars to stop being so scared of being absorbed by films. What *is* there to be so scared about? That we might all lose our minds? That films will hypnotize us all? Or are film scholars still so elitist that they conceive of their task as one in which they must save more gullible others from the perils of cinema's fascistic absorptions?

I, for one, am prepared to advocate films that foster absorption. I can begin to complicate our understanding of what absorption is, however, by first of all stating that one need not be absorbed by *narrative*, for one can be absorbed by *spectacle* as well. Or more to the point, one can be absorbed by spectacle and narrative at one and the same time. These are the kinds of issues approached in my earlier article.¹¹ Suffice to say that surely it is time for film studies to move beyond its utterly simplistic affirmation of spectacle and its concomitant denigration of narrative. Only by doing this can film studies begin to engage with the pleasures of absorption, the pleasure of entering into a film's world, of being in a film's place. Only by doing so can we begin to stop being scared of films and enter into the constructive exercise of examining *what films are* and *what they have the capacity to be*. If we do not do that, then we will continue on the negative merry-go-round of endlessly criticizing films for what they are not, in a desperate attempt to salvage the vestiges of spectacle from the imagined seductions and illusions of narrative.

**Laura Mulvey, *Death 24× a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*.
London: Reaktion Books, 2006, 216 pp.**

MARY ANN DOANE

With the advent of the digital and the consequent perception of a new malleability in representation and information, attention has shifted in film studies to the photographic base of cinema – its material distinctiveness and the specific nature of cinema’s cultural intervention in the twentieth century. Following the marginalization of Bazin’s work that accompanied the analysis of the ideological complicity of realism in 1970s film theory, the emphasis for many years had been on the optical (Renaissance perspective) rather than the chemical aspect of cinema, and on space (mise-en-scene, the frame) rather than temporality. However, in an age of intermediality a new engagement with notions of cinematic specificity has emerged. This is not a commitment to an essence or ontology of film, but rather a closer examination of film’s materiality and its historical promise that ultimately returns to Bazin and to the indexicality of the medium.¹ At stake is our understanding of cinema’s relation to temporality and historicity.

In this vein, Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24× a Second* is an elegant and nuanced investigation of time, stillness, movement and death in their cinematic incarnations. Mulvey traces her personal trajectory of thinking about film from her early groundbreaking essay in *Screen*, ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema’, to her current interest in the impact of new technologies of spectatorship – videotapes and DVDs that allow the viewer to manage the unfolding of time, to slow down and freeze movement. For Mulvey, digital technology has produced a decisive rupture in representation: ‘The conversion of recorded information into a numerical system broke the material connection between object and image that had defined the earlier history’ (p. 19). This material

¹ See, for instance, Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); *differences*, vol. 18, no. 1, special issue: Indexicality: Trace and Sign, ed. Mary Ann Doane (forthcoming Spring 2007).

- 2 Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume II: Elements of Logic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), pp. 143, 159; James Hoopes (ed.), *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotics by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 25, 239–40, 251.
- 3 Jean Epstein, 'Magnification and other writings', trans. Stuart Liebman, *October*, no. 3 (1977), pp. 21–4. See also, 'Intelligence d'une machine', in Jean Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma: 1921–1953* (Paris: Cinéma club/Seghers, 1974), pp. 255–334.

- 4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: The Noonday Press, 1981).

connection is ensured by film's photographic basis and is shared with the medium of photography. The sensitivity of film to light makes it the bearer of the trace – what Charles Sanders Peirce referred to as an indexical sign (the footprint, the weathervane), differing from other types of sign in that it is physically *caused* by its object.² The index, more insistently than any other sign, is haunted by the real and by an uncanny sense of temporality. Mulvey is particularly adept at untangling and analyzing the complexities of the cinematic's relation to temporality. Like the photograph, film records a precise moment in time, preserving the ghostliness of the past, but unlike the photograph, film is experienced as movement, life, presence. Mulvey confronts here the fundamental paradox of cinema, noted very early on by Jean Epstein: the emergence of an illusion of movement from the stillness of a series of photograms.³ This cinematic oxymoron spirals out into further paradoxes concerning the inanimate and the animate, life and death, the real and the spectral. Mulvey demonstrates, through an attentive reading of Freud's essay on the uncanny, how the sign that would seem to be closest to the physical and the real – the index – is also, given its relation to time, a harbinger of the uncanny. The photograph and the film both bear within themselves the traces of a past and an intimation of death.

There is a form of melancholy that haunts this book, not only in its meditation upon the cinema's relation to death but also in its acknowledgment that the cinema-we-once-knew is dead or dying. Digitized, the cinema no longer carries the special, physical relation to time ensured by its indexicality. Mulvey takes issue with Roland Barthes's assertion that film, due to its inscription of movement, refutes the aura of death invoked by the photograph's freezing of a moment in time and leaves no room for the punctum (the idiosyncratic singling out of contingency so unique to the viewing of a photograph).⁴ Access to the stasis of film (death 24× a second) is not limited to the new technologies of VCR and DVD, but can be attained by paying heed to a certain stillness the cinema has always sought to incarnate. Mulvey herself has been aware of this since her 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in which the concept of spectacle locates stillness in relation to the fetishization of the woman, her suspension of narrative movement in a moment of pure pose, to-be-looked-at-ness. Her current approach disengages stasis from a politics of sexual difference and concentrates upon its relation to death, memory and the punctum. She implicitly posits a spectator who is less attentive to the vicissitudes of gender and more concerned with the passage of time and its symptoms – ageing, decay, loss and death.

This allows Mulvey to produce a fascinating and incisive analysis of the star, who exemplifies the conjunction – or perhaps the collision – of icon and index. On the one hand, the star's indexicality ensures an intense awareness, on the part of the spectator of old films, of mortality. Despite the incessant activity onscreen, this spectator knows that Katherine Hepburn, Ingrid Bergman, George Sanders, and so on, are

dead, revealing the film's affinity with a process of mourning. While the time of the fiction seeks to swallow up and deny that recognition, there remains a residue of knowledge. The image of the star 'shifts between these two registers' but also involves the iconography manufactured by the studio together with the 'biography' constituted by scandal and gossip. According to Mulvey:

This kind of additional knowledge, combined with the passing of time, brings the 'shudder at the catastrophe that has already occurred' that Barthes mentions in relation to Lewis Payne, the young man photographed just before his execution. 'I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake'. Watching James Dean, Natalie Wood, and Sal Mineo, the three teenagers in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), that shudder then triggers another one. Knowing the deaths of all three, which were to come and which have already taken place, arouses the irrational sense of fate that Freud cites as an instance of the uncanny. Overlaid across the indexical uncanny that is derived from the photographic medium itself, in the Hollywood, or indeed any other star system, is this other uncanniness, a sense of an over-determined life, subject to an order and force outside that of the ordinary. (p. 174)

The pose assumed by the star (Robert Mitchum in *The Big Steal* [Don Siegel, 1949], for instance), as a sheer assertion of the star's own presence and iconography, constitutes a moment of stoppage that displays the photographic substrate of cinema. The temporality that Mulvey is most concerned with, however, is not so much the time figured within the diegesis, but the temporality and historicity of cinema itself and our mutating relation to the medium. The passing of time indelibly inflects the reception of star performance. The complex temporality of the pose anticipates what the cinema will have been for us now, looking back.

Mulvey's fine theoretical chapters, exploring indexicality, the uncanny, the death drive, deferred time, and the possessive and pensive spectators, bracket a series of lucid and insightful readings of films – Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia/Journey to Italy* (1953), and the work of Abbas Kiarostami (*A Taste of Cherry* [1997], *Where is my Friend's House?* [1987] and *And Life Goes On* [1991]) – as meditations on stillness and movement, photography and film, past and present. The uncanny maternal body in *Psycho*, the excavation of the plaster casts of bodies at Pompeii in *Viaggio*, and the past in the form of traces and ruins in Kiarostami's films all outline an intricate dialectic in cinema between now and then. In her preface Mulvey states that she has moved beyond the rigid opposition between classical Hollywood cinema and the avant garde assumed by 'Visual pleasure' and now sees the greater aesthetic coherence of the cinema as a whole produced by new technologies of spectatorship. Thus,

Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993) produces a reflection on time and death that is already there in the original, while Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1971) and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) take their place in a paradigm of films that investigate the photographic base of cinema – the Zeno's Paradox-like generation of movement from stasis. This hitherto invisible similarity is revealed, according to Mulvey, by the new technologies of slowing, delaying, reversing and halting the unremitting linear movement of the projected film.

Yet this possibility and desire existed much earlier, in the 1970s, with the historical practice (subsequently vilified by 'cultural studies' and a new historicism) of close textual analysis. Before the advent of the VCR, reel-to-reel videotape, Moviolas and various forms of editing equipment allowed a frame-by-frame analysis that served a linguistically informed semiotic approach. Mulvey acknowledges this in her homage to the pioneering work of Raymond Bellour, but is also careful to point out the crucial difference of contemporary technologies. Previously, close viewing was only possible for film theorists and critics, those professionally engaged in the study of cinema. Today, Mulvey stresses, new technologies have democratized this form of viewing, making it accessible to anyone with a VCR or a DVD player, who can now share in witnessing the 'fascination of time fossilized'. Yet what are the determinations and consequences of this dissemination of a different praxis of spectatorship? Sometimes it almost seems as though, for Mulvey, technology has provided a resolution of the political dilemmas of spectatorship delineated in 'Visual pleasure'. The 'possessive spectator' she describes is a fetishist who 'wounds the film object in the process of love and fascination' but also 'reinvent(s) its relations of desire and discovery' (p. 178). This is a 'penetration' and even an 'emasculatation' of the film, producing 'a fragmented, even feminized, aesthetic of cinema' (pp. 179–80).

However, Mulvey's most surprising move is in the chapter on the 'pensive spectator', the one who in stopping the film discovers its *punctum* and reflects upon the spectral qualities of the cinema, its relation to time and death. In 'Visual pleasure', the undermining of the sexual politics of Hollywood cinema and the project of a radical filmmaking practice involved an effort 'to free the look of the camera into the materiality of time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment'. In *Death 24 × a Second*, Mulvey claims:

Something like this transformation of spectatorship has now taken place. The spectator's look, now interactive and detached from a collective audience, can search for the look of the camera while also asserting control over the look within the fiction. . . . The psychosexual dimension of visual pleasure meets the human psyche's anxiety at the shadow of passing time and the inevitability of death. (pp. 190–91)

But who is this spectator in control, and what is this cinema of emancipated desire? One strongly suspects that the pensive (and perhaps even the possessive) spectator is ultimately Mulvey herself. There is in this book a longing and nostalgia for a cinema now perceived as being in its death throes, a cinema that can be dissected and loved even more strongly, bit by bit. The close reading of the 1970s was informed by a kind of scientific ideal; that of $24 \times$ emerges as an elegy. The practice of slowing and stopping the *défilement* of the film in order to contemplate the relation between time, death and the uncanniness of the index is not that of ‘anyone with a VCR (or DVD player)’ but of the theorist, the critic, the cinephile of long standing. Despite the uproar caused by Mulvey’s dismantling of pleasure in ‘Visual pleasure’ and the attacks upon what was perceived as a wholesale dismissal of the classical film, that essay was the product of an intense cinephilia. However, the deep love was accompanied by a keen and incisive political analysis of both cinephilia and sexual difference that grounded and gave orientation to feminist work for decades. Here, though, the political implications are not so clear.

The dissemination of DVDs and VCRs has indeed made it easier for viewers to engage with classical cinema in various ways. However, these different modes of production and distribution constitute a new (or possibly simply an intensified) regime of images – one that is not as utopian as we would perhaps like. Mulvey herself writes of ‘the political appropriation of time’, but argues that a delayed cinema enabled by these technologies is resistant to current tendencies to erase the past and to deny the historical, to signal the ‘end of an era’ through a clearcut delineation of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ (p. 23). Yet the acceleration and propagation of individualized ways of consuming images coincides with historically specific changes in commodity capitalism. Commodification now works through the promotion of notions of personal style and lifestyle, and training in consumerism masquerades as the proliferation of choices provided by ‘interactivity’. Commodification no longer strives to produce homogeneity – in its objects and its consumers – but thrives on heterogeneity. Mobile phones used as both still and video cameras and exhibition venues make the image portable, manipulable, communicable – the world becomes both eminently film-able and file-able (Kracauer’s nightmare of photographic historicism). Mulvey astutely points out that ‘The [twentieth] century had accumulated a recorded film world, like a parallel universe, that can now be halted or slowed or fragmented’ (p. 181). Mediation gives way to remediation or even hypermediation, and one is forced to wonder about the effects of this doubling of images, of the transformation of images (rather than the world) into the raw material of our discourses.

According to Jacques Derrida, ‘archive fever’ – determined by the death drive, by finitude and destruction as limits – strives to halt that destruction, to deny finitude.⁵ It sets up a bulwark against time. In this

5 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 12, 19.

sense, death is the unthinkable of the technological archive (and of technology in general, as prosthesis of the mortal body). Death is not simply that which haunts the interior of the photochemical image in the uncanniness of the index, but that which threatens the photochemical support itself. The scratches and markings on old film stock, the decay of the image, are the marks of time and a historical trajectory. In the virtual world we negotiate today, information and representations seem to exist nowhere and it could be said that the cultural dream of the digital is a dream of immateriality, without degradation or loss. What is lost in the move to the digital is the imprint of time, the visible degradation of the image. In a culture that valorizes technology, death is concealed or evicted, held at bay. Perhaps this is why Mulvey is so intent upon finding – seeing – death in the cinematic image, necessitating the reverse transformation of film into photograph. For her, the cinema reread becomes a haven for the political reappropriation of time.

Death 24× a Second is an immensely intelligent book that isolates and explores crucial questions raised by the anticipated and feared demise of a photochemically based cinema. Mulvey's nuanced theoretical chapters contribute to the revitalization of debates about temporality and indexicality in the cinema and her critical readings of films are, as would be expected, powerful and elegant. The question that must be posed has to do with the ultimate political effectivity of an aggressively assumed nostalgia. This is not to embrace the notion of linear progress or the superiority of the digital. Film theory cannot fail to acknowledge (or does so at its own peril) a contemporary merger of memory and media that is not simply personal or autobiographical, but pervasive and systematic, with consequences that we have not yet begun to guess.

David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 256 pp.

AMY HERZOG

David Martin-Jones begins his project with an observation: over the course of the past ten years a number of films, from a range of national origins, have engaged in conscious manipulations of narrative temporality through the use of reversed, fragmented or paralleled story lines. While the formal similarities between films such as *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Peppermint Candy* (Chang-dong Lee, 2000) might suggest the codification of a certain global aesthetic (the association of jumbled narratives with an international 'indie' or 'art' film style), Martin-Jones argues convincingly that, in each case, these experimentations with narrative structure bear a highly specific relation to questions of national identity. Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of temporality, in particular his work on cinema, provides the foundation for Martin-Jones's study, which explores the complex, and often contradictory, ways in which time, space and historical memory intersect in these films. This dualistic approach, integrating Deleuzian philosophy with grounded, historical analyses of contemporary films, is both innovative and productive, particularly given Martin-Jones's commitment to an international focus.

Formal experimentation with temporality in cinema, Martin-Jones notes, frequently occurs within the context of historical upheaval – perhaps most famously with the emergence of Italian neorealism and several European 'new waves' in the wake of World War II. Deleuze's *Cinema* volumes are loosely centred on this historical moment, citing a dramatic shift in spatiotemporal relations in film, whereby the 'movement-image' (action-driven narratives in which time and space are

- 1 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: the Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and *Cinema II: the Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 2 One notable exception appears towards the end of *Cinema I*, where Deleuze discusses key differences in the political and economic climates of Germany, France and Italy after the war, in addition to structural differences within their respective film industries, that led Italy to experiment with new cinematic approaches earlier than other countries: see Deleuze, *Cinema I*, pp. 211–2.

dictated by logical, causal connections) gives way to the ‘time-image’ (discontinuous ‘any-space-whatevers’ populated by ‘seers’ rather than active agents).¹ Though Deleuze cites the postwar period as a time that gave rise to a more temporally based cinema, he provides few concrete details regarding its manifestations in national contexts.² Deleuze’s approach here is strategic: he points to corresponding trends across a wide range of cinemas to stress the philosophical underpinnings of the emergence of the time-image, an image whose significance resides in its active relation to perception and thought. Yet as a result, Martin-Jones notes, the *Cinema* books remain vulnerable to charges of ahistoricism, particularly when the split between movement-images and time-images is misread as a simplistic opposition between Hollywood and its European, art cinematic ‘other’ (p. 7).

This is not to say that Deleuze’s philosophical project is antithetical to historical or political approaches to film. Indeed, Deleuze’s view of film as a site of provocation, a means of generating new modes of creating and thinking, seems to invite explorations into specific historical and national situations. That *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* demonstrates what such a project would look like is one of its greatest strengths. Rather than concentrating on ‘an epistemic shift in Western thought after the Second World War’, Martin-Jones carefully takes into consideration the individual political and industrial conditions in each of his studies, which span a range of European, North American and Asian cinemas.

Martin-Jones writes with a clear focus on making Deleuze relevant to contemporary film studies, foregrounding the contributions this theory brings to debates within the discipline while also noting the limitations he finds within Deleuze’s own work. Unlike a number of authors who have engaged with the *Cinema* books, Martin-Jones does not concentrate on minoritarian or overtly political films but looks at contemporary works that straddle the boundaries between ‘independent’ cinema and the commercial mainstream. In each instance, he identifies a complex cycle of de- and reterritorialization, whereby the anxieties wrought by historical crises give rise to destabilized, more temporally oriented, cinematic images. These images, in turn, are subject to recuperation and codification within their respective national cinemas. Yet this cycle is never perfect or complete – what we find, instead, are ‘time-images “caught in the act” of becoming movement-images’ (p. 5).

Within these ‘hybrid’ films, there emerges a duality, a movement towards a labyrinthine, multiple and discontinuous temporality that is countered by a pull towards a linear, teleological solution. These tendencies correspond to conflicting constructions of national history, each offering contradictory visions of truth, identity and the origins of the nation. Martin-Jones finds that these hybrid films further correlate questions of national identity, and the creation of that identity, with the construction of individual character identities within the narrative (p. 29). Drawing on Deleuze’s writings on Kant, Martin-Jones posits that the Bergsonian bifurcation of time ‘into a present that passes, and a past

that is preserved' in these works can be linked to a split subject, 'an I that acts, and an Ego that both endures and contemplates the I that acts' (p. 30). Thus the presence of multiple temporalities in hybrid films corresponds to multiple 'selves' who compulsively perform their identities within each narrative thread. These multiplied performances give rise, in the process, to deviations in form that throw notions of a singular, truthful identity into question. Within the politics of the narrative, Martin-Jones suggests that these various 'selves' are further conflated with the construction of a national identity, whereby the memory of the character – or at times the process of memory enacted by the narrative structure itself – comes to stand in for that of the collective nation.

Martin-Jones makes a provocative connection here with Homi Bhabha's discussion of the 'double time of the nation', in which the past is selectively narrated via the present in order to construct a semblance of continuity and unity (p. 33). Much as the performance of the self always threatens to deviate from, and as such destabilize, the subject, the continual re-narration of the national past via the present serves to undermine dominant histories. When film takes part in this process of narration, 'minor' cinemas can take an active role in resisting and deterritorializing official national discourses. Yet Martin-Jones suggests that even films originating from more stratified positions can reveal fissures within the construction of nation. His case studies thus focus on films that express this dualism, mapping the ways in which they both question and recapitulate hegemonic narratives.

Part I provides a clear and concise summary of the key issues raised in Deleuze's *Cinema* books, and elaborates the theoretical foundation for the study that follows (these chapters would prove particularly useful for those seeking an introduction to Deleuze's work on film). Part II contains the film analyses themselves, grouped by geographical region, theme and time period. There are moments when the division between these sections feels too distinct; within the readings of individual films, a further elaboration of several of the Deleuzian concepts laid out in Part I would help to deepen both the theoretical and the historical components of the study. That said, the analyses themselves are thorough and convincing, and integrate questions of marketing, audience and industrial structures with a philosophical approach – an impressive feat, and a model for future scholarship in this vein. Martin-Jones makes Deleuze 'matter', in that his historical perspective stresses that the Deleuzian distinction between time- and movement-images is not merely formal, but deeply political. He further reads the reception of the films themselves, both by general audiences and in the context of film studies as a discipline, in relation to the construction of national identity. His discussion of *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), for example, links critical responses to the film with *auteur* theory, the emergence of an international festival circuit, and Italian politics (pp. 77–8).

The film analyses tackle issues of globalization while stressing the continued relevance of national identity. Indeed, the shifts wrought by global markets appear, in many ways, to lie at the heart of the anxieties about nationhood that drive the films examined. Chapter Three, for example, looks at the ways in which *Run Lola Run* and *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1997) negotiate questions of identity within the global cities of Berlin and London. Martin-Jones finds that the paralleled temporalities in each film contrast ‘good’ and ‘bad’ versions of a reality in which the heroines perform their identities. Despite the explicit ways in which these cities are depicted as modern and homogeneously global, he insists that these films are grounded in their points of origin. The films’ attempts to suppress the unique qualities of their cities in favour of a more generic urban landscape can be read in several ways. On the one hand, the films invoke ‘anywhereness’ in an attempt to court an international audience, in effect creating the spectre of an ‘absent nation’ (p. 115). Yet on the other hand, the positive valuation of more properly ‘global’ narrative tracks (those that perform the ‘correct’ economic and ideological decisions) always takes place in dialogue with a national past.

Martin-Jones’s analysis of US cinema is particularly strong. His discussion of American triumphalism maps a heritage of cinematic historical revisionism stretching back to *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915). Unconventional temporal structures in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) can thus serve as an ameliorative attempt to rewrite ambiguous and unresolved conflicts (the First Persian Gulf War, the Vietnam War) under the guise of World War II. By contrast, Martin-Jones demonstrates through a nuanced reading of Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) how the film is able to negotiate post-9/11 identity crises and the limitations of the independent film market ‘to smuggle in a critique of mainstream American cinema’s construction of national identity’ (p. 173). The chapter on Asian cinema is equally impressive, and contains some of the book’s most fully developed links between national histories, shifts in the media industry, the evolution of film criticism and readings of the films themselves.

One question that arises for me has to do with the significance of gender and sexuality to the intersection of national and character identities. Martin-Jones addresses this explicitly in his discussion of *Sliding Doors* and *Run Lola Run*, noting how male figures, particularly those framed as potential love interests, function as catalysts for transformation, dovetailing with lessons regarding class and entrepreneurship and complicating our reading of these seemingly independent female protagonists. He also references the significance of rape-revenge narratives to constructions of triumphalism in the US films. Yet I found myself wondering how similar questions might inform his reading of *8½*, a film that is referenced throughout the book as a narrative that deterritorializes cultural memory, but which appears (at least on the

surface) to leave stereotyped notions of femininity firmly entrenched. This might be somewhat beside the point in terms of the context of the 8½ references, but there are other cases that seem to invite a more in-depth consideration of gender in relation to nationhood. For example, Martin-Jones argues (quite convincingly) that the closing line of *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1995), 'Forget the Alamo', 'calls for a Nietzschean forgetting that would realign time in a labyrinthine manner to acknowledge America's multiple histories' (p. 140). I find it curious that he does not mention the ethical context in which the line is spoken – to allow for the continued romantic involvement of the two lead characters, who have just discovered that they are brother and sister. I raise this issue not to dispute the author's readings, but to venture that if the overlapping of personal character narratives and those of nationhood can manifest themselves in either de- or reterritorializing ways, the construction of sexual identity may be one of the symptoms by which we can gauge a film's inclinations.

This is not so much a critique (for indeed these questions of gender and sexuality may fall outside the purviews of the book) as it is evidence of the provocative areas of inquiry suggested by Martin-Jones's work. His attention to the nuances of the movement-image and of the various hybrid works that slouch towards time-images might in fact prove more useful to the field of film studies than works that devote themselves exclusively to the rarely realized potentials of the time-image. This is a work that expands our understanding of the construction of nationhood in film, one that remains sensitive to the numerous registers on which these constructions are enacted.

Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914–1918*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006, 304 pp.

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

Michael Hammond opens this study of British cinema culture during the Great War with two questions: what was the impact of the war on the development of cinema in Britain, and how might audiences have made sense of the films they saw? In the process he takes up a number of challenges to the construction of film history in general and British cinema history in particular. These include: a shift of focus from producers to exhibitors and audiences; retrieval and reconstruction of the conditions of reception; recasting notions of the ‘national’ by consideration of the ‘transnational’ circulation of films, including the pervasive presence in Britain of US films; and replacement of definitive interpretations or ideological readings by a focus on the practices and processes of cultural circulation which respond to conditions on the ground.

The bulk of this study, therefore, presents a microanalysis of a clearly defined period (the years 1914–1918) and place (Southampton). For this city port, the outbreak of the Great War meant a dramatic shift from commercial to military activity, providing a heightened context in which to observe interactions between commercial, social and governmental demands on an emergent mass medium. A central paradox of this period is expressed in the mantra, ‘business as usual under abnormal conditions’. For the film industry, 1914–1918 was a crucial period in the establishment of the economic base and filmic forms that would ensure the permanence of cinema, but at a time – in Europe at least – of extreme social instability. Conventionally this is perceived as giving Hollywood the opportunity to consolidate its growing dominance of British screens. However, through investigation of the circulation and reception of different kinds of films – British Roll

of Honour films, official war documentaries, US features, Chaplin comedies – Hammond traces not only the negotiations through which exhibitors, legislators, commentators and audiences contested the role of cinema but, recognizing that cinema emerged in a context of continuities as well as change, also the mediation of US films through indigenous entertainment traditions and interpretative frames. Thus refocusing historical research from production of films to their conditions of reception requires a rethinking of the questions that can be asked of them. Combining Janet Staiger's 'event of interpretation' surrounding the reception of films with Miriam Hansen's 'horizon of expectation' within which an audience responds, Michael Hammond conceives cinema as a social space mediating between public sphere and private perception. Thus his case-study films come alive not as great works of authorial cinema history understood through definitive interpretations, but as active participants in the processes of imaging and meaning production.

Crucial, then, is Hammond's painstaking mapping of the specific conditions of exhibition in Southampton, while sketching in broad, national trends or comparative practices in other cities and regions. Beginning with a wonderful account of Bank Holiday saunterings by a local journalist investigating the diversity of entertainments offered in different parts of the city, Hammond's first two chapters focus on the divergent practices of key exhibitors. Analyzing patterns of programming, advertising and promotional practices, he traces the interaction of exhibition with audience demographics that not only varied according to class but shifted under wartime conditions. On the one hand, exhibitors drew on past entertainment traditions, taking particular lessons from music hall's entry into mainstream culture by targeting family audiences and providing luxurious venues. On the other hand, exhibitors confronted the emergence of new audiences as women entered the workforce, embarking or returning (often wounded) soldiers filled the town, and the middle classes discovered cinema's topical relevance through newsreels and official war films. Screening the latter, together with acts of 'practical patriotism' such as servicemen's discounts or contributions to war charities, enabled exhibitors to claim social respectability. However, competition for new audiences, including young women now endowed with disposable income, encouraged programming of white slave, society or crime melodramas, leading to uncanny juxtapositions between sexualized fantasies and battlefield images of death and destruction which provoked alarm in official quarters.

Such tensions and ambivalences recur throughout Hammond's account of shifting exhibition practices and reception responses. Thus Chapter 3 explores Roll of Honour films, featuring projected photographs of local men gone to the front. As casualties mounted, their function, Hammond argues, changed from public celebration of sacrificial duty to memorialization, which in turn, resonant with private

loss, led eventually to their abandonment. Situating these images within traditions of Victorian portrait photography, of ‘recognition’ scenes in popular melodramas, and the growing popularity of spiritualism, Hammond perceives a shift from integration of individual and community into nation towards alleviation of private fears of anonymous death in the trenches.

If the Roll of Honour films touched too raw a nerve, the handling of war films became a central problem as the war progressed and public debate focused on whether cinema should be a force for information and education or for entertainment. When the War Office commissioned *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), the US fiction feature was becoming established as an international standard, and Hammond’s next chapter examines the tension produced by the Somme film’s mix of documentary record and dramatic reenactment, between contradictory critical discourses emphasizing either its informatively educative or sensationally ‘entertaining’ realism. The dual imperative of the period – to make cinema a permanent feature in the British cultural landscape and to negotiate its function in relation to the war – is vividly illustrated in Hammond’s analysis of the adaptive processes involved in the circulation and reception of two US ‘super films’: D.W. Griffith’s nationalist *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Thomas Ince’s implicitly pacifist *Civilisation* (1917). As exclusive features, screened in theatres with full-scale orchestras, these films, with their claims to creative authorship, historical gravitas and artistic aesthetics, were important to exhibitors’ bids for respectability and the middle-class audience.

However, in examining the exhibition and reception context, Hammond draws attention to the difficulties they presented as films addressed to US spectators, embedded in their own historically determined ‘horizon of expectations’. In analyzing how these films were subtly redirected in the UK context through promotional, publicity material or editorial cuts, Hammond reveals the interaction of text and context as a variable process, subject to conflicting aesthetic and ideological reading protocols. Thus the racial core of Griffith’s film could, in its British promotion, resonate with propaganda claiming German military brutality and the rape of ‘Little Belgium’, while publicity equated the regeneration of the American South with England’s hoped-for renewal. Tapping into theatrical traditions of popular melodrama, the film called into play nostalgia for both past class stability and British imperial hierarchies. Nonetheless, Hammond finds, it is the tragedy of war and separated families that dominated the film’s reception context, rather than white supremacist discourse. The greater difficulty of promoting *Civilisation* – which referenced the sinking of the *Lusitania*, particularly potent for Southampton audiences attuned both to the earlier loss of the *Titanic* and current dangers to merchant shipping – and its poorer showing at the British box office illustrate the problems presented by war dramas in a time of war as well as the impact of local conditions. Pressure to provide realism, the source of cinema’s claims to seriousness

as well as entertainment value, also ran the propaganda risk of revealing the horrors of war and humanizing the enemy.

By the closing years of the war, cinema had won its place as an established and officially recognized feature of British cultural life. An important source for Hammond's investigation are the documented interviews with a range of public figures conducted by the National Council for Public Morals. Linking changing programming practices with such debates, Hammond argues for the importance of comedy in allaying anxieties provoked by sensation melodramas, leading to the NCPM's endorsement of cinema as a valuable source of rejuvenation: laughter eased forgetting. Crucial to this surprisingly enlightened perception was the regular programming of Chaplin's comedies across the range of differently class-oriented cinemas. Thus government and public commentators uneasily concurred with the industry that cinema should centre less on public information, education and moral uplift than on entertainment, releasing audiences into private fantasy, laughter and escape. Radical arguments for alternative forms of cinema as sites of social resistance and change traditionally regard this shift into the private with suspicion. However, Hammond's fine-tuned investigation of both local and national reception contexts offers a more nuanced understanding of the processes by which the 'cinema habit' became established in Britain through the interaction of traditional and contemporary, US and British, cultural attitudes and entertainment forms.

This cultural interchange occupies his final chapter, in which Hammond compares the reception in 1918 of Griffith's *Hearts of the World* with Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* within the perceived paradox of the times, expressed by Robert Graves as 'the war would never end' and 'we would win it' (p. 223). If official acceptance of the uplifting, socially cohesive benefits of cinema underpinned the MOD's commissioning of Griffith to make *Hearts of the World*, the 'master plot' of the war narrative which ends in the restoration of peace conceived in terms of the past was coolly received. For contemporary audiences, the pragmatic irreverence of Bruce Bairnsfather's 'Old Bill' cartoons and Chaplin's 'slacker' appeared to express more accurately the ambivalences and contradictions of the wartime worker's and soldier's relations to authority, the national crisis and the needs of daily survival. This final chapter, then, brings together the several challenges which Hammond's study confronts, focusing attention on interactions between cinema's continuities and innovations on the one hand and its transnational exchanges on the other. In this respect Hammond activates the tensions implied in the notion of a 'transatlantic vernacular' derived from Miriam Hansen, which modifies conceptions of Hollywood's monopolistic dominance. For if Griffith mobilized the Victorian ideology of separate gendered spheres in order to refocus European melodrama's pathos on the loss and recovery of innocence (as Linda Williams suggests),¹ the Americanized Chaplin cued into the European link between pathos and

1 Linda Williams, 'Melodrama revised', in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 42–88.

irony, appealing to the audience's superior knowledge of the unequal forces that entrap the unknowing victim. Whereas Chaplin's US stardom grew out of the identification of Charlie with his character, the tramp, Hammond finds the British advertising of Chaplin's Keystone films appealing to audience familiarity with his earlier music-hall career and to British cultural values which distinguished the actor's – Charles Chaplin's – performance and impersonation skills from his tramp character. At the same time, however, Chaplin's British appeal, emerging from his success in the USA, gained from its association with New World modernity.

Hammond's study, then, suggests how a focus on exhibition practices and the culture of circulation repositions films and their textual practices, opening up new ways of perceiving their potential meanings and effects for socially contexted audiences. In his introduction, Hammond recognizes that the responses of actual audiences have long vanished, and that his understanding of 'reception' is not the ethnographer's. However, his careful piecing together of the conditions of reception – including physical location and structure of the theatres, the programming, advertising and promotion of films, press and fan reviews, public debates about their social effects and cultural values, inflected through the impress of the war on local needs and national policies – leads him to posit perhaps the most tendentious concept of his argument: the 'homefront imagination'. This concept stands in for the missing experience of historical viewers. Against the danger of displacing the exhaustive imperative of textual interpretation by the potentially homogenizing notion of 'imagination', Hammond makes an innovative attempt to reconstruct from the range of evidence at hand a Southampton courting couple's evening at the pictures escaping the confines of their respective families. Whether or not this speculatively creative approach works for the reader, the diversity of materials focused in this book through the specifics of cinema exhibition in Southampton provides vivid access to the social, cultural and aesthetic currents that must cross in any historicized moment of viewing. It is therefore both essential reading for anyone concerned with pursuing the further development of cinema in Britain and a model for historical analysis.

Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, 379 pp.

KATHLEEN M. GOUGH

If one were to go about tracing a genealogy of cultural and political identification and *disidentification* between Irish Catholics in Ireland and people of the black diaspora living in the Americas it would begin some time in the early seventeenth century. It was at this time that the Irish and African ‘races’ began to be discussed analogously and pejoratively in British colonial discourse. By the mid nineteenth century, Irish and African-American political leaders Daniel O’Connell and Frederick Douglass found productive efficacy in these negative analogies: they reimagined a positive crosscultural identification in order to unite their fights for the abolition of the Penal Laws in Ireland and slavery in the USA. Ever since that (too often cited) alliance there has been a variety of interactions – imaginative, critical, political and physical – within and between the Black and Green Atlantic.

In the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, however, these interactions frequently did not reflect positive mutual support. In large measure, the sense that Irish and African-American struggles were the ‘same’ was considered ‘true’ in direct measure to the distance between the communities. That is, analogy and not proximity worked as the more operative model of identification. Indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century (and particularly in the last twenty years in the USA and in ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland), representations of Irish ethnicity have become – to use Diane Negra’s phrase – ‘particularly performative and mobile’ (p. 2). Of course, ‘blackness’ is not the only dialectical referent for considering representations of Irishness. Nevertheless, the muddled genealogy of Irish and African-American relations does cast a long shadow over the ubiquitous ways in which

- 1 See, for example: Hazel Carby, "What is this "black" in Irish popular culture?", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2001), pp. 325–49; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001); bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (London: Routledge, 1994); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

'Irishness' is deployed – culturally and politically – in the contemporary moment.

The thirteen essays collected in *The Irish in Us* investigate the current phenomenon of celebrating all things Irish by employing a range of lively, critical methodologies. As Negra writes in her introduction:

The book originates in concerns about the imbrication of Irishness with a number of ideological agendas, including the depoliticization of difference, the reclassification of forms of whiteness as 'ethnicity', and niche-market saturation leading to a process in which commodities that have lost their luster are reendowed with (ethnic) meaning. (p. 2)

This is not the first time that scholars working in and between the disciplines of film, television, performance and cultural studies have investigated the flexible economy of white Irish 'ethnicity'.¹ It is, however, the first edited volume to explore how contemporary Irishness is constructed in such a startling variety of representational media: from Irish Famine curricula in US high schools to heritage tourism; the music of Van Morrison and Garth Brooks to Sinéad O'Connor and Bob Marley; Fox wartime musicals to *Riverdance*; *In America* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; and Bennigan's Irish-American Bar & Grill to Irish-American identity politics after 9/11. The essays in this volume cast their net wide and yield some refreshing insights.

What is, perhaps, not too surprising (given the ambitious array of topics included under the 'Irishness' umbrella) is that the essays do not appear to be organized using any particular critical criteria. While this is not hugely problematic, it does mean that reading the essays in the order in which they appear can be slightly unnerving, and one can miss the dynamic ways in which several of the essays speak to one another. Nevertheless, the essays *do* speak to each other in a manner that helps to elucidate shared methodologies, as well as thematic and theoretical preoccupations.

Catherine Eagan's essay, 'Still "black" and "proud": Irish America and the racial politics of hibernophilia', deftly historicizes how 'Irishness' and blackness were co-produced before turning her attention to how a new generation of Irish-Americans are being educated about their history. By examining the intersecting spheres of popular culture (*Riverdance*, *Gangs of New York* and *In America*, for instance), historical literary fiction and education networks (high school history curricula, museums and documentaries), Eagan argues that ubiquitous representations of an oppressed Irish past mean that many Irish-Americans fail to 'admit their shift from a past history of oppression to a present history of assimilation and power' (p. 23). This is most effectively brought home to readers when Eagan turns her keen critical skill to an investigation of both the New Jersey and the New York high school history curricula on the Great Irish Famine. She is careful to point to the interesting work the curricula are doing, as well as to the differences between what is taught in New Jersey and New York.

Nevertheless, Eagan discusses how rudimentary comparisons between Irish-American and African-American experience in nineteenth-century America can lead to anachronistic claims, depoliticize the serious differences between the communities and lend little critical insight into how this history is manifest in present-day race relations (and representations of white ethnicity).

Michael Malouf's essay, 'Feeling Eire(y): on Irish-Caribbean popular culture', extends Eagan's discussion by considering the utter resilience of 'Irishness' to analogously attaching itself to black culture throughout the Atlantic World. Malouf attends to a range of striking examples, from *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) to Sinéad O'Connor's infamous 1992 appearance on *Saturday Night Live* ('where she sang reggae star Bob Marley's "War" *a cappella* while tearing up the pope's picture' [p. 319]), to Kate McCafferty's historical novel *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl* set in a seventeenth-century Caribbean colony. By putting these representational forms in conversation, Malouf theorizes the 'absent presence of race' evident in these cultural events (p. 319). In turn he demonstrates how (Caribbean) blackness is used as the analogous and knowable 'other' that allows Irishness to define itself while – paradoxically – erasing the black bodies, locations and specific histories that give rise to the analogies.

If these two essays tacitly theorize formations and constructions of Irish diasporic identity, Stephanie Rains's essay, 'Irish roots: genealogy and the performance of Irishness', considers the widespread enthusiasm for genealogical research which is particularly popular among Irish-Americans. Rains argues that the influence of Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots* (and the subsequent television miniseries), along with 'major theoretical shifts which have occurred within the history academy itself' (p. 137), contributed to the scale and enthusiasm for tracing family genealogies in the USA. That is, while the popular novel and miniseries helped to generate interest, the 'practical developments in cataloguing' in the field of history (p. 137) meant that tracing family history became – to some extent – tenable. Thirty million pounds was spent in 1996 alone when members of the Irish diaspora (predominantly Irish-Americans) returned to Ireland to trace their roots (p. 136). Yet, among white European diasporas living in the USA, ethnic affiliation is often a matter of choice. This has led to a 'dislocation between practice and terminology in pursuit of family history' (p. 157). While the terminology of 'rootedness' remains the same, the actual practice is largely concentrated on webs and networks – that is, a concentration on routes and not roots.

While enthusiasm for tracing one's roots by travelling back to Ireland generated one form of heritage tourism, another more unlikely form is the mass consumption of Irish-themed merchandise in the USA. In "The best kept secret in retail": selling Irishness in contemporary America', Natasha Casey states that 'from \$3 shamrock head boppers to lavish upper-middle-class Irish theme weddings at the country club there is an

Irish-related product available in every sales category in contemporary America' (p. 85). Casey discusses this phenomenon by employing a rubric which categorizes sanctioned consumers (Irish-Americans), ancillary consumers (those attracted to the popularity of all things Irish) and deviant consumers (a disturbing group whose ranks include David Duke, and who incongruously display flags and signs of 'Irishness' as a way of performing whiteness). The argument here is that 'selling Irishness' is possible because of the 'astute marketing awareness of the "everything and nothing" nature' of this identity (p. 94).

Indeed, it is certainly this widespread capacity of Irishness to signify 'everything and nothing' that allowed country music star Garth Brooks to construct 'Ireland and country music as shared sites of tradition' (p. 211). In 'Garth Brooks in Ireland, or, play that country music, whiteboys', Mary McGlynn argues that, while Brooks's popularity in the USA is usually explained in terms of his ability to cross over into other musical genres, it is in the Irish context that he most firmly attaches himself to his Southern country music roots. Moreover, by linking his popularity in Ireland to his own family roots in County Cork (although Brooks is from Oklahoma, his mother's grandmother supposedly hailed from Cork), he is – paradoxically – capable of performing Southern provincialism while appealing to an international market.

Whereas Brooks was interested in creating roots in Ireland and attaching himself (and his music) to the Irish landscape, Lauren Okney discusses why Van Morrison was more interested in leaving his Irish roots behind – both personally and musically – to follow the routes of his American influences (music he was first introduced to in Northern Ireland). In 'Ray Charles on Hyndford Street: Van Morrison's Caledonian soul', Okney argues that, in contrast to a group like U2 – who evoke blackness to 'legitimize the Irish as Celtic soul brothers' (p. 163) – 'Morrison's work suggests that the relationship between blackness and Irishness can be modern, transatlantic' while also providing 'alternatives to fixed identity rather than one that reinscribes colonial, racist stereotypes' (p. 164).

This notion of transatlantic conceptions and representations of Irishness is also addressed – although in a wildly different context – in Gerardine Meaney's essay, 'Dead, white, male: Irishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*'. Here she examines 'the function of Irishness in these series as both an exemplary, assimilable white foreignness and as a site of displacement of the difficulties of white identity within postmodern popular culture' (p. 254). Through a series of astute close readings of several episodes in both series (focusing particularly on the Irish vampire, Angel/Angelus), Meaney is able to make a strong case for Angel's ambivalent sexual and racialized status. His Irishness, Meaney suggests, is 'rather like the show in which he appears, both mainstream and at odds with the mainstream' (p. 279).

Alongside these essays are several other compelling investigations: Maria Pramaggiore's 'Pregnancy and performance in Irish cinema', Sean

Griffin's 'Performing Irishness in the Fox wartime musical', Maeve Connolly's 'Traveller identities in Irish and American culture', Amanda Third's 'Race, gender and the redheaded woman' and Negra's 'Identity politics before and after September 11'.

If readers can get past the rather unfortunate book cover, which depicts a leprechaun tattoo transposed onto the arm of a white teenager, they will find a refreshing and innovative collection of essays from a new generation of Irish Studies scholars. *The Irish in Us* is a thoroughly interdisciplinary volume that arrives in print not a moment too soon. In a field that often reproduces constructions of an 'authentic' and monolithic Irish identity at the expense of asking uncomfortable questions about both the benign and the insidious ways contemporary Irishness is called upon to perform itself, this volume is a welcome addition to the discipline.

Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2005, 213 pp.

ALISON PEIRSE

Inevitably, *The Lure of the Vampire* begins with a study of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. While the object of study may be well worn academically, Milly Williamson's method is original, creating readings of *Dracula* from the position of Victorian women, particularly the working class and lower middle class, and the poor. Attempting to historically 'read' social anxieties and fears from the period contemporary with the text's production can be problematic, but Williamson offers illuminating and persuasive evidence for her approach by examining the changes in various medical and penal laws in Victorian England. Crucially, she outlines the potential fears of the working class as a result of the 1832 Anatomy Act. Prior to this, executed murderers were dissected as part of their punishment, but this was repealed in the Act, which instead legalized the use of paupers' bodies for medical dissection. Dissection was regarded as mutilation by the working class and poor, 'who generally deplored the possibility of their own bodies, or those of their loved ones, being cut up and disembowelled, and who associated the anatomist with the cruellest punishments meted out by the state' (p. 19). Williamson argues that this fear of death, the anatomist's knife and dissection after death 'constitute[s] an alternative reception context for *Dracula* the novel amongst the working class and the lower-middle classes' (p. 24), within which the staking of Lucy by the Crew of Light is particularly relevant.

Williamson then studies the historical roots of the 'sympathetic vampire' phenomenon and suggests that, while this figure is a key trope of contemporary film and television, it is not a modern phenomenon and can be traced back to the figure of Lord Byron. The study of Byron is

- 1 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: TV Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992); John Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 30–49.

- 2 Many academics, from a wide variety of disciplines, have analyzed *Buffy*, producing accounts which are wildly varying in quality. For two well-rounded views of the series, see: Anne Billson, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (London: British Film Institute, 2005); Tanya Krzywinska, 'Hubble-bubble, herbs and grimoires: magic manichaeism and witchcraft in *Buffy*', in Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery (eds), *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer?* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 178–94.

followed by an analysis of the sympathetic vampire in contemporary culture through the study of the *Vampire Chronicles*, a series of novels by Anne Rice, the first of which, *Interview with the Vampire*, was published in 1976. In a close analysis of the vampire characters Louis and Lestat, Williamson links the sympathetic vampire with the melodramatic imagination. She argues that the 'sympathetic vampire has been considered to be rebellious, domesticated, intimate – and indeed it is all of these things at one time or another – but most of all the sympathetic vampire is *melodramatic*' (p. 40, italics in original), and that 'Louis' entire unwanted ontological status is his flaw, and thus his flaw is excessive and taken to the extremes appropriate to melodrama. His unwelcome vampirism is not a sign of evil, but of victimhood' (p. 41).

Chapter 3 draws upon Williamson's own interviews with vampire fans in Britain and New Orleans, conducted between 1997 and 2001. The collation of this interview material has two objectives. The first is to challenge the characterization of the 'fan' in fandom, in which cultural theorists, including Henry Jenkins and John Fiske, have previously conceived of 'the fan as a hero of popular culture, a rebellious figure who was likened to a guerrilla fighter, invading the territory of mainstream culture and poaching meaning from texts' (p. 56).¹ Instead, Williamson claims that 'attitudes to fandom are changing' and that 'fandom has never been "outside" of culture, but has always fitted into the dynamics and politics of the cultural field, and the struggles therein to designate cultural worth' (p. 56). Her second objective is a study of the engagement of female fans with the figure of the sympathetic vampire. Williamson delightfully disrupts the feminine–passive–masochistic approach by arguing that 'female fans do not identify with the vampire's female victims, but rather, empathise with the sympathetic vampire figure itself' (p. 57).

This chapter also marks the point at which the reader becomes aware that *The Lure of the Vampire* is not simply a work of textual analysis. Instead, Williamson moves between literary theory, film theory, gender and race studies, textual analysis, queer studies, audience reception studies and ethnography to produce an original and illuminating book. The cross-disciplinary approach could potentially raise problems, resulting in a bitty or fractured text, but thankfully the mass of disparate material is drawn together in Williamson's clear and cogent writing style. Her multi-pronged analysis of the figure of the vampire, the reception of the vampire and, in later chapters, the fans' reworkings of the vampire myth through their own fiction and sartorial style, results in new and thought-provoking readings of what is by now a heavily documented area.

According to Williamson, the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) has pushed Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* away from centre stage in popular vampire culture. Sensibly, Chapter 4 avoids some of the less than critical academic writings on the television series.² Indeed, this chapter is a far from whole-hearted valorization of *Buffy* as a

3 Vivien Burr, among others, has addressed the problematic collapsing of boundaries between the television fan and the academic in relation to *Buffy*, in 'Scholar /shippers and Spikeaholics: academic and fan identities at the Slayage conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2005), special issue: The Vampire Spike in Text and Fandom: Unsettling oppositions in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, eds Dee Amy-Chinn and Milly Williamson, pp. 375–83.

4 See: Lynne Edwards 'Slaying in black and white', in Roz Kaveney (ed.), *Reading the Vampire Slayer: the Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel* (London: IB Tauris, 2002), pp. 85–97.

5 Kent A. Ono 'To be a vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: race and ("other") socially marginalizing positions on horror TV', in Elyce Rae Helford (ed.), *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 174.

protofeminist text that embraces difference and deconstructs gender, race and class boundaries. While Williamson claims that *Buffy*'s 'themes of female empowerment, anti-authoritarian collective activity, and in the later seasons, an exploration of sexuality' (p. 85) offer fertile ground for academic analysis, she goes on to criticize the series for having a 'progressive message that is couched in terms of middle-class white sensibilities' (p. 90). There is the suggestion that the *Buffy*-in-the-academy phenomenon has partly come about because of the explicit address of the series to a white middle-class educated audience.

Consequently, as part of *Buffy*'s natural demographic, scholars of popular culture have embraced the show at a personal and professional level.³

Chapter 4 also draws upon textual analysis to problematize the representation of slayer Kendra in Season Two of the series. Utilizing Lynne Edwards's analysis of *Buffy*'s black female slayer, Williamson points out that Kendra can be read as an update of the 'tragic mulatto' in contemporary culture.⁴ Although Kendra appears to be accepted by the white Scooby gang, she fails to fit in, for 'her racial identity is marked as "ethnic" (that is, not "white") by her physical appearance, her sartorial style, her Jamaican patois, her lack of understanding of "Buffy-speak", even her name' (p. 86). Kendra quickly meets her demise when her throat is slashed by the vampire Drusilla. On this point, Kent Ono has noted resignedly that 'the fact that Kendra is a woman of colour who ultimately and unexpectedly has her throat slit is just one more instance of a woman (of colour) who cannot be a hero'.⁵

In the second half of the book Williamson reconceptualizes audience reception theory in order to provide a framework for analyzing vampire fandom and, in the process, presents a thorough and rather damning criticism of Jenkins's model of fandom in *Textual Poachers*. She argues that Jenkins's model of textual poaching by fans is utopian and that, 'despite the changes in the structure of television audiences and the increasingly middle-class character of fandom, Jenkins continues to assert that fandom is a subordinate social formation, populated by the oppressed' (p. 100). Her critique of Jenkins is convincing and intelligent, but the chapter's lack of engagement with the figure of the vampire itself means that the book loses some of its excitement and pacing. Although there is clearly a point to setting up a detailed and nuanced theoretical framework in order to analyze the material presented in later chapters, there is little of interest here for the more casual reader, or even for the academic. On the other hand, the lucid critique of *Textual Poachers* will be indispensable for those teaching audience reception theory and television studies.

The final three chapters examine practices of vampire fandom in various British and US fan clubs and societies, the sartorial style of vampire fans, and vampire fan fiction, particularly the homoerotic subgenre of slash fiction. These chapters are a useful contribution to the ever-growing and popular study of fandom and cultural theory, but the real draw is the entertaining bitchiness of the vampire fans that

Williamson interviews. Williamson's ethnographic research reveals a clear contrast in Anne Rice fandom between the 'official' fans in the Anne Rice Vampire Lestat Fan Club (who, Williamson argues, uphold commercial imperatives and work to serve Rice herself) and the unofficial fans who are attracted more generally to the 'outsiderdom' of the vampire world. These unofficial fans lack direct access to Rice, are considered of less importance than the 'official' fans, and generally resent their subordinate position, in one case withdrawing, 'bitterly disappointed at the strict hierarchy', from an ARVLFC conference in New Orleans to 're-establish a sense of common purpose and community elsewhere'. This challenges Jenkins's insistence that the fan is able to speak as part of a collective identity, 'for vampire fandom in New Orleans does not automatically confer a sense of collective or shared identity' (p. 121).

Somewhat puzzlingly there is very little mention of the *Buffy* spinoff series *Angel* (1999–2004), in which the central protagonist is clearly cast in the sympathetic vampire mould, and would seem to be ideal material. Additionally, it is a shame that there is not more material on the little-known US daytime Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* (1966–71, 1991), mentioned tantalizingly briefly throughout the book. On the whole, though, there is little with which to find fault. *The Lure of the Vampire* goes far beyond a simple textual analysis of the vampire in film, television and literature. It moves fluidly across disciplines and theoretical approaches, and threading together apparently disparate programmes, texts and ideas in an illuminating and appealing manner. As such, it should appeal to scholars of fandom and of cultural theory, as well as all those with a love of the macabre.